

Pennyfields—a volume of poetry;
and *Two Best Friends: Reading as a
Writer in Elizabeth Bishop and May
Swenson*—a critical thesis

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Dominic McLoughlin, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:.....

Date:.....24 April 2015

Abstract

Pennyfields – the volume of poetry in the creative section of this thesis – explores the notion of living in something that is already an artwork or a memory or film. The poems often display an interest in doubles and twins, and in the reversed priority in artistic production between original and copy. The question of reading and how it is integrated into creative work is central both here and in the critical section of the thesis that follows.

The critical thesis adopts the term ‘best friends’ to examine the work of Elizabeth Bishop and May Swenson, two poets who particularly matter to me. This term is used by Bishop to distinguish between poets to whom one is personally drawn and others who may be more generally seen as worthy of admiration. In order to explore this idea of ‘best friends’ and, more particularly, the professional relationship between Bishop and Swenson, I use the idea of ‘reading as a writer’ as opposed to reading as a critic. I consider what is meant by reading as a writer in the institutional context of creative writing pedagogy, but I focus more particularly on my own engagement with Bishop and Swenson — and their reading of one another. There is no attempt to create an entire theory of reading as a writer, but rather, I pay scrupulous attention to its place in the relations between Bishop and Swenson and how it operates in my own case. I view the dynamics of these exchanges in terms of D.W. Winnicott’s object-relations theory and his concepts of the ‘transitional object’ and ‘potential space’, ideas which I introduce in Chapter One.

Bishop’s engagement with Gerard Manley Hopkins, one of her chosen ‘best friends’, is the focus of Chapter Two. This leads into accounts of how contemporaries Bishop and Swenson read one another in Chapters Three and Four. I argue that what is distinctive about their relationship is the quality of carefulness in their mutual responses, akin to exchanges in a workshop. In Chapter Five I focus on the work of Bishop that chimes with my own poetics, and in the final chapter I discuss poems in *Pennyfields* which seem to have learnt most from Bishop and Swenson. Chapters Five and Six thus present my practitioner’s reading of Bishop and how this reading has influenced my own work. Reading as a writer is used in a flexible way throughout the thesis to carefully examine how poets — who are appreciated from a practitioner’s point of view — might be considered as ‘best friends’

For my mother, Shirley McLoughlin
and in memory of my father, Michael (1934-2011)

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Professor Jo Shapcott and to my advisor Professor Robert Hampson for their expert guidance and support.

I also wish to thank the poets who have encountered some of the work in *Pennyfields* at earlier points and offered their advice, especially Mick Delap, Malene Engelund, Lorraine Mariner, Kelley Swain and Sarah Westcott.

In the production of the critical writing I have benefited from the encouragement and comments of fellow doctoral students in the English Department at Royal Holloway including Liz Bahs, Aviva Dautch, Kate Potts, Declan Ryan and Robert Selby, and of colleagues at Heythrop College, particularly Dr Anna Abram, Dr Tony Carroll, Dr Fiona Ellis, Dr Bridget Gilfillan-Upton, Dr Sean Ryan, and Dr Gillian Paterson.

Friends and family have helped to sustain me throughout the process of writing from beginning to end: I would like to thank Ed and Eve, especially for all their kindness during my visits to Santa Fe where some of the poems were written, and Giles and Suki for all their support. Many thanks also to Lizzie Peasley, Alasdair Pettinger, Ellen Schnepel, Lee Smith and Saradha Soobrayen.

I wish to remember my father Michael and to thank my mother, Shirley, to whom this thesis is dedicated.

Finally, I wish to offer grateful thanks for her love and care to Ruth who, as well as being an expert reader, has inspired me in ways I could not have imagined.

Oh, must we dream our dreams
and have them, too?

—Elizabeth Bishop

Pennyfields

Dominic McLoughlin

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With thanks to the editors where the following poems have previously appeared: 'XLIX', *Spiritus* ; 'The Problem of Identity', *Poetry Review* ; 'Love Song with a Sandcar' and 'Floodtide in the Morning', *Ambit*.

On Reading

With the flood happening in the back garden
luckily Noah had parked his ark
on the garden wall, high enough to host

the procession of unlikely characters
who were pitching up there two by two.
I saw the gangplank with its rutted

surface made to help the heavier beasts from
slipping backwards, but this was suspended
in the air. There was a sense of the miraculous.

Years later a neighbour's house and garden was
the site for *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.
Spirits lived in that house more easily than ours.

I could see Colonel Aureliano working in his shed
there, stamping out little golden fishes.
Let me climb into a Perspex box, suspended above

the Thames and let you watch me from the riverbank.
You can imagine whatever you like,
but I shall be silently reading.

The Way Things Are

As from Lucretius, Book VI, lines 160-203

Lucretius was on the phone. We have these back and forths:
he tries to tell me something I don't know. I say
Lucretius, that's not the way it goes. This morning

was a case in point. When clouds collide, their fiery
atoms snap into place to form a lightning bolt.
Just the way flint against flint causes a spark.

We don't hear thunder straight away, but delay
between what's seen and heard is only normal.
I was amused but not persuaded. He went on.

Wind scoops out the centre of a cloud. You mean
like in a tumble drier? Sort of. It causes cloud to thicken
and gain heat. Everything gets hot with rapid motion:

think of how lead propelled from a gun melts as it travels.
Yeah, I know. He said, The wind gets the cloud so agitated
it can burst into flames. I felt I could accept this.

He made an abstruse point about the beauty of clouds
whether seen from below or from the side. They are a joy
to behold from any angle. Especially, as he explained, when clustered

around a mountain top like whiskers
on an old man's chin. I wanted to develop this
but he butted in. He said, Clouds, when invaded –

duffed up as it were – by the wind, develop the fury
of bated wild animals in a cage. This was Saturday
morning; I was trying to relax. As thunderous

conditions are maintained clouds start to growl. Their
heat in a stack causes fire to spread: lightning
flashes in a blessed release, channeling electricity.

I said Lucretius this is hot stuff. You should be writing it down.

In Gordon Square

Corny I know to sit here reading *The Waves*.
(Notice how the sunlight splashes onto

the page). Seeds from the plane trees
fall like rain. Or rise, like Bishop's

fireflies, the bubbles in champagne.
Golden light. And what is golden

gleams, even in the shadows. Drawn
towards darkness I sit carefully in it

counting the names of the lost.
Even without the wind

we would be blown by time my darling,
across and through this garden square.

In all our movements, every
flicker of our being and becoming,

we leave a trace, and the seeds race
towards whatever may go, and stay

Paolo and Francesca

It was reading that did it. A story
that unravelled. The hero splashed out –
he couldn't help himself – one big kiss spent

on that most longed-for smile. As we
read on, our lips just had to come together,
a glorious strawberry fever. Tricked

by the book, tempted over and over into union
we lost count of the numbers, as ideas became
deeds and we became authors, singers, fools.

Dante's Inferno Book V

The Problem of Identity

Two ferries run in the summer months
taking passengers out to the beach.

The Evening Star is skippered by Laddie Lane,
The Morning Star by his son Tiddler.
Different vessels sailing at different times
with different captains (from the same family).

The Evening Star and *The Morning Star* are
both “the ferry that goes out to the beach”.

The Evening Star is not the evening star,
just as *The Morning Star* is not the morning star.
(Neither of them is Venus).

Laddie Lane sails *The Evening Star* on the morning tide.
Tiddler Lane spends three evenings out of seven
in *The Lord Nelson*, so *The Morning Star*
sails on afternoon and evening tides.

Lane, as we have seen, refers to the same family
but not to the same person. None of this
is difficult, confusing or philosophically troubling.

But on a full moon, it is a sight to see
with the entire creek flooded, the marshes covered,
moonlight beating on the water,

The Morning Star and *The Evening Star*
securely fastened to their separate moorings.
Laddie Lane, you’d have to say, safely in bed,
Tiddler Lane in the pub drinking ‘Nelson’s Blood’.

Above us all in the night sky: the evening star,
which is the morning star, which is Venus.

A Finzi Reverie

By the opened windows onto our Juliet balcony
I'm putting my feet up beneath philosophers
beginning with B—Bachelard, Barthes,
Blanchot—while you lie dozing on the floor.

The only music to be heard is ambient sound
around this borrowed flat near Gare du Nord,
and traces of Verlaine we've read out loud
The sky above the rooftops is so blue, so calm...

Birdsong, afternoon traffic, the tick
of a bicycle echoing in the courtyard:
love lies in what we're not waiting for,
the call of a suitor from the street below.

XLIX

Skip philosophy and go straight to what
I'm wearing. Cords, worn out at the knee.
Special sandals so my feet don't ache.
Summer shirt with a t-shirt underneath.

It's winter. I can't read a wine bottle
held at arm's length. I urinate in dribs
and drabs, am better now with novels.
Noisy neighbours look back at me

from their other world. Transcendence
and nothingness want equal houseroom.
I want them to know how to live together.
I want to notice every flicker of feeling

as these are the turns by which my soul
is made. I want to understand number
although there may be nothing to understand.
Just a sequence, like growing older.

Ladder Training

And so it was with the ladder training.
We walk under ladders within certain
cultural frames of reference. There's always
danger being several rungs up from *terra firma*.

This workshop made us stop and think
about walking in the air. Were we happy about it?
Was there more room for manoeuvre
if a colleague held the ladder

while we progressed, as gingerly as we liked,
towards what was effectively the stars?
We tried to keep the thing in perspective
but it kept travelling far, far, away. In the afternoon

a ladder was placed not up the wall, but horizontally,
between trestles. How much of a platform did this
here-today-gone-tomorrow rigging provide?
Might it ever be more useful than a plank

with its interruptions of negative space?
Later, A-framed aluminium steps
repeated themselves over and over
on an otherwise bare stage.

Beauregarde and Me

She's teaching him kisses and how to say hello.
Dancing near his cage she turns on her heels
in a moment, dazzling with her swivelling hips.

I've trained my eye on that monocle dangling
from a piece of string between her breasts.
Why a man's monocle? Who will she be inspecting?

I'm devoted to this spectacle, wanting it to
puzzle me out from its Upper West Side perch.
Beauregarde and me are both struggling to be free.

The Weigh-in

I'd like to hammer seven bells out of you.
My boots are laced and I'm on tiptoes.

See these silk shorts, how they gather at the waist?
That spells curtains for you. Don't even think about

punching me below the belt. How much I hate you
is etched into my face. This chin is leading,

this jaw's not something you'll get close to.
On the kisser? You must be joking.

Here's where the room starts spinning early doors,
here's where you stare into the bucket between rounds,

here's where you hate to face me across the canvas
and wish I wasn't stalking your every move.

Here's where you want to throw in the towel and say,
You're the man, the first man ever, to knock me out.

Rooftops

My heart is high
among the water tanks
and fire escapes, the asphalt
hot to the touch on summer nights.

You brought me here
where we've smoked grass
and now have split a water-
melon, our lips redder with juice

our shoulders clothed in night air,
nestling against tower blocks
in mid-town. You've kicked off
your shoes. Those long, narrow feet

are something quite marvellous.
We're not grounded by sadness,
not for a good five years yet.
We've emigrated to this lonely spot

where no-one knows who we are
or what we are doing. We translate
one another using laughter and touch,
and never want to come down.

The Return

They all come back to the dovecote
at this time of day, shooed in
by a helping hand. There's always one
who's last, lagging at the apex
or on the guttering, oblivious
to the others' escape from twilight.

Then, after his own inimitable
interval he too flies home.
Nothing like that has happened to me.
The obscure trajectory, the delay.
Like one waiting on a platform — for a lover
or a train — under the station clock.

Reprieve

I could be years inside this shop, listening
to canned Beethoven, smelling rubber and sawdust
as I scour the empty birdcages, gerbil cages, hamster
mats, hooks for hanging dog-chews
made in China. In the back my uncle
chews on the misery of last night's losses
at the Playboy Club. I've noted the tell-tale
blue tissue paper screwed up in the corner
suggesting he's on the Martini even at this hour.

Fast forward to the time he meets his second wife –
a no-drink, no-cigarettes regime where old
sensitivities and a life well-lived came back.
But I'm still here, between the fresh
as paint DIY store-come-pet shop, and dark
times behind a velvet curtain, the air
thick with lies. Not far off his age then, I wait
for my reprieve, feeling my way towards a new hat.

Swan in Landscape

We've stopped halfway across
on the Ha'penny Hatch to look at
a swan swimming on the creek at
this time of night on a low tide.
Behind, the Laban Centre's lit up
in emerald, turquoise, mauve
casting a washed out haze
over the water and the moon-lit mud.
Jane says, 'Hang on' and fishes
out her sketchbook. I've walked
on and now look back at her
in the shadows. I'm trying to recall
exactly what she is seeing, the swan
barely moving, the line of its neck
and head and back against the silvery
current. I'm looking at – what? – casting
around, taking in the railway arches,
graffiti on brickwork, puddle at my
feet. I look upstream as if to look
at her would be to put her off.
'Sorry', she says, eventually, cramming
the pad back into her bag. 'It's okay',
I say, proud really that we caught
something unexpectedly. Deptford is
inhabited by such wild creatures
moving tonight. The lamplight
picks us out going home side by side.

On Deptford Market

Sifting through a tray of remnants
on the market, here's tubes of oil paints
screwed up like fag ends, their casings
twisted and scorched so you can't read

the names. Vermillion that might be,
but I can't tell if there's enough of it
to be worth taking home. This is how we
treat our materials, the last left

for some other poor soul to make something
of it. Turning points. A hinge, a swivel
neatly at this mid-point in life.
What use can be made of past loves?

What picture might be painted out of what
we already know? The time to settle –
if not settle down or settle up. Husbanding
resources, make the most of what we've got.

Riddle

You sign off messages in lower case
making something of yourself: the local prison
or police station, affectionately known.

Or you're a cut from a shave too close,
and what the light fingered do as they
lift a tenner from their mother's purse.

It gets worse: in caps, you're part of a name
for the devil. But you're also an ancient means,
I reckon, of keeping count on a tally stick,

the flaw in a blade that marks a knife
as having truly served, and that part of time
in which – at last! – all comes good.

Not Kidding

Caped, smashing a fist into my palm
it's all I can do to listen out for the Batphone.

There goes its pulsing red light—a live emergency.
I pick up the bone, get it between my teeth
and it's you, Robin, in your silks and masquerade.

Separated by a split-screen we talk in punchy,
urgent sentences, explosive and now.

There's so much more to say but any moment—Kerpow!—
one of us will turn on his heels. Robin, you seem
different. Your voice higher, that sympathetic tone.

Where I was impressed before, now my heart
is truly beating. Holy Dirt! It's poetry

that's turned me on to you after all these years.
Battling Crusaders! Just wait until I see you next,
take you in, lead you away!

Switchback on Christopher Street

He was a young Massachusetts cop from a small town.
We met on a climbing trip in the White Mountains.

We were learning the ropes. He was chubby,
so not a natural but we had an equal share of

“air time”, a consequence of one foot too far,
or not far enough, or not enough chalk

on the fingertips. Arriving back in Manhattan
I got off at Christopher Street. It was early

Sunday morning in Springtime, 1985.
The stop was not the closest to my home on West

4th Street. Bleeker Street or 7th Avenue
would have served me better. Where was I going?

Making my way I turned in one direction and then
another when a cry rang out, “He switched back!”

A stone’s throw from Stonewall still I wasn’t sure
where to put myself, over twenty five years ago.

Since when I have had a lot of air time,
calling on others to take the strain,

to be there for me when I should have been leading.
I skipped away, flattered by the attention, but guilty,

affronted. Also nearby, *The White Horse*
where Dylan Thomas drunk himself blind.

Shower Outside

The workings of the mind
are never on show. The piping
of the Pompidou, that revelation
makes us take a step back,
into our own intimate craftiness.

To be stuck inside this body,
my house—1960s semi-detached,
predictable and uniform, good enough
for the neighbourhood—makes me
thrill to the shower outside

at your holiday home. Each evening,
after a swim in the Sound, I'm hosed
down just out of sight while you
are standing at the kitchen sink.
Under the chestnut tree

I stretch into nutmeg shampoo,
a festival of lather. Hockney
wants me here in America
where I'm growing, architectural,
natural. Hidden, yet visible.

The Festive Bus

The route home is well worn: turning left,
approaching the park gates, walking down the path

or across the grass in dry weather, to the bus stop.
None of this requires imagination, just a kind of training.

Guiding me is a modest agent-memory.
But not too much. It is best I act blindly.

I might have expected the squeal of brakes,
the failure to draw up parallel to the curb—

a thousand finer details of how it appeared,
and how I adjusted myself to meet it.

This time however I couldn't help but hesitate.
The bus was painted in garish colours, and covered

with balloons. It gave me pause for thought.
Was this the bus I had been waiting for?

News from the Philosophy Department

Ever since the philosophers discovered justice
or at least found out the way in which it moves
they have preferred to travel on carbon neutral

transportation, from the pedalo on water
to the scooter on dry land, both propelled by legs—
the most energy efficient of our bodily means.

When they came to design their own building,
having gained the upper hand over developers
and engineers, they requested that a paternoster

should carry them between floors. They understood
all its moving parts; the economics and hydraulics
of the pulley appealed to their sense of balance.

For every proposition there should be a counter
and what goes up must come down. O Philosophy,
you angel! Caught forever between commerce and love.

The Great Bear

Inaccurate but readable is this diagram
of London's underground lines.
The picture it makes is elegant,
with touching intersections

and the occasional dotted line
where the terminus is under construction.
In our daily lives we travel
not on the lines but on the picture,

and mostly are comfortable with this.
All our lives we draw lines
between the stars, and watching clouds
see animal shapes, the mythological.

To be joined up and made whole then,
is to tell a story. Even if it's
just the story of a yellow circle
silver horizontal, vertical blue.

Standing Stones, Bere Island

After Nico Ismay

It is standing four-square on Percy's plinth,
its two parts may be slowly tilting.
The curves echo waves and seashells,
blocks ground the thing in gorse and clay.

The figures, you'd say, are between them
earth and air. The monument has captured
something of fire in its own fierce baking,
of water in its constant soaking by the rain.

Why have I brought you here? What has
all this got to teach us about anything?
Something about the value of waiting, maybe,
like a bicycle tipped into the hedge, which

lies there all day while he's at work. But look,
the sunset's come down early, the monument
now in half light at best. Perhaps that's all there is
to wait for, to mend whatever's broken.

By Rio en Medio

It started with wild roses and chokecherries.
You said you liked it when the desert met the forest,
cactus next to ponderosa pine, but after that

most names of flora and fauna eluded us:
tobacco plants maybe, where we watched
not-quite hummingbirds sip their nectar.

Cornflowers and willows by the side of the stream.
We took off our shoes. You gave me a flake of mica
from the sand bed like your toenail, mother of pearl.

By the waterfall there was a hammock smoothed
into the cliff face to lie in. We took it in turns.
Stepping out of it you almost fell into my arms.

At the gentlest falls I showed you an impediment
balanced and caught on the edge of a rock,
how it diverted the water and also helped it flow.

It dithered in the stream's pulse, the current
passing around it, and we understood how
if we moved that stick, everything would be changed.

Twelve pairs of gloves

I left twelve pairs of gloves at your house
over just one season. Countless times I couldn't
hold my mind. You stored them carefully
in a drawer, keeping them matched until
such time as I would mention them. I did
collect one or two pairs, then forgot
them again, always leaving with cold fingers.

It's hard to know what this is saying, how
in losing we lose something of ourselves
but if that part is kept by someone else –
just as memories can be kept –
the experience of love survives. I'm sorry
you haven't left anything at my place,
so far as I know. I have looked everywhere.

Figure-ground

I can't quite see the figure you have made
lolling back, arms half dislocated
one knee slightly up at an angle,
his long thin trunk, his chin from where you stand
all gone throat. Something quickens
the blood, clicks, so that you're mad for each line.

The cold in the room recedes and you peel off
your fingerless gloves. You use just a few flecks
of white chalk to point up shadows and folds.
The hipbone takes some time to re-imagine
before it's right in your mind, your drawing hand.

This model, you've got the grain of him, feel yourself
inside his skin even as you work at his balls,
their happy sac, the plane of his thighs,
the whites of the soles of his feet, cupping light.

You are inside him and I inside you –
this is the way of desire, its petty increase
from day to day and year to year. The figure
is always the hero and we forget ground, the less
than glorious backcloth in which we have ordinary lives.

Dali on the Steps of the St Regis Hotel

In the breakfast room someone is playing
the harp. The waiter asks Ed to remove
his hat, a special fedora bought after the operation.
At the sight of his shaved head and wrap-
around scar above the hairline, the waiter allows
the hat to remain. Later we will drive through
the Arizona desert to 'Silly Love Songs' and
'I Will Survive'. I'm fifteen, thinking of Tammy
all day and all night, how much I love her
and feel close to her and want to tell her
about this, about swimming in Big Sur
in my new bright red shorts,
jumping into the breakers, riding on Highway
One. We've been stopped by the cops for speeding
and this is it, Salvador Dali we can see you
now in your long mink coat, we are taking you in.

The Painter

All that summer the painter on the bank
sat each day brush in hand making the sky,
its reflection in the narrow creek,
the boathouse, the slipway and the marshes.

Near the shoreline an abandoned vessel left
radial markings like a clock face in the mud.
She wasn't painting this. Her mind was set

on a longer view. And yet over and again
she was drawn back towards this eloquent craft,
its gentle impressions and constant revisions
a form of record keeping that was ethical,

lines written by the keel at different angles
on each flood. By such divisions the landscape
painted her, captured something of her mood.

The Third Layer

The mountains and their deep
desert floor, the clouds, chancey
but fundamental in their own way,

the aspen trees riding by the road-
side, the moon hanging all night
in its sky space, planted just so

are all what we call the first layer.
It even includes your house
found for us by the location scout.

You won't mind that we had to move
your stuff out. That sofa was not the look
we were going for in the second layer.

This bag of cigarette butts?
A red elastic band holding nothing?
Our speciality, my friend, is the third layer.

The fluff on the carpet, a tea bag
the hero hasn't cleared away.
Post-it notes. A receipt, crumpled,

from the drugstore. The viewer
won't think that it's part of the story
but without it nothing would be real.

My Brother as a Calder Mobile

As you walk along the harbour front
in Porto Ercole, the town throws out
your name, *Ciao Giles!*

A figure in space
like a jar in Tennessee,
say — sculpture describes world.

A man in motion, drinking
his morning cup of coffee.
He pushes the saucer round

with affectionate disdain.
Ignores the black sweetness
like a disinterested lover

or matador for whom
looking away is invitation.
He swoops down on a measure,

a mouthful, but no more.
Replants the cup. Then again,
a final draft. It's gone.

You are out of the café
and into the morning air.
A man wants to sell you rope

shows you three kinds of thickness
and thread. Your graceful exchanges
help this town float on the breeze.

Raising the Gate

Hopeless. The gate won't swing
open for any man, or for my mother
who has to lift it out of the mud

each time to allow my father to
drive on. On this home visit
three brothers have been enlisted

to raise the gate. A mechanism
has been designed to straighten
the offending stanchion. It involves

wires, hammers, stakes in the ground,
even a pickaxe at one point,
I think I saw. My role is uncertain.

It always was a beautiful red
gate, and now it travels when
released, with the lightest of touch.

When her sons have left, still
she will have to get out of the car
to unlatch on entering the farm

but will handle the cold metal steadily,
walking it to the corner, bringing our father
home with the lightest of touch.

Having Children

A hut in the middle
of a field off the Dry Road was used
by the local poetry society. They had booked

Hugo Williams. He gasped for air
at half time because the atmosphere
is stifling amongst cut flowers

and high praise. Read Michael Hoffman,
he said. I wrote down *Nights at the Iron
Hotel*. What is a young man like you

doing in a place like this?
The next day I must have walked again
along the bank, turning at the first sight

of the North Sea. My mother
sat here before she had me, smoking
Gauloise, looking out at white horses.

This was how she looked when my father
fell in love with her, in a blue thing,
her fringe across one eye.

I'll just stay out here a while,
watch the smoke snatched from her mouth
by the wind. Her thinking about having

children. Me wanting to be
like Hugo or Michael when I
grew up. But soon it becomes cold.

I stand on the dunes, remembering a kite
from the Esso station — a tiger in your tank —
wanting to be like Elizabeth and May and Mark.

Chanel Pour Monsieur

He worked at the perfume counter.
He was my tennis partner.

We met at the net
before each match – the receiver

was to keep score. Thirty-all.
Thirty-forty. Deuce.

We were a match. I told him
about childhood at the Chelsea Drugstore

where we played pinball
on Saturday mornings.

What was that scent? *Chanel
Pour Monsieur* I became fond of,

found it hard to vary
my style. A masculine fragrance

for one so tentative, but he
liked it on me from the start.

Like all players, I remember
certain shots that went in:

taken on the run, forehand
down the line. He liked working

at the department store,
gave me samples to carry home.

Martin, I think his name was.
It was such a fleeting thing.

At Antiquarius one morning we met
on the stairs, our colognes

exchanging base notes
for a passerby to swipe on the air.

Triple Kissing

I understand the practice of triple kissing
starting on the right cheek as one has to do.
More a dance than an embrace,

it tempts us into intimacy. No less does
a handshake, the way you took my hand
last night, not wanting to let go.

What Are Poets For?

The lowest London moon fits between
branches at the top of Drury Lane
and fairy lights around a street café
hungry for open air even this late in the year.

Along New Oxford Street, over High
Holborn, this heavyweight low slung shiner
beams on our hurry and flow. I'm away
from the class in Bedford Square

where we talked about poetry and place:
how we hold the planets and their satellites
no less than they hold us, in a tricky
cosmic field of description and praise.

By the time I've reached Waterloo Bridge
the moon has climbed to a respectable
height—not even the river could draw
it down. Hard to know if something's

been lost since I first looked longest
at this London moon. Or if its
innocent appearance has pulled me up,
this gambolling urbanite, old friend.

The Glass Flowers at Harvard

The flat leaf of a London Plane tree
upon my bookshelf at work, picked up
one day from the college garden
at first was something fresh, if fallen,
the second day might have cheered
me, the next week made me think of
Marianne Moore, or a pelican's webbed
feet. But by now, two seasons later
it's lost its brown. Too brittle to wave
in the air, it's ossified and friable
beyond belief. I couldn't even
write about it until yesterday.
Once a feathery clock, it taunts
me: what are you doing with your life?

Atget in New York

Modern reproductions of Atget's
vieux Paris are laid out in my blanket
sale on West 53rd Street. It's 1985.

The photographer, my roommate,
insists when I sell them that I claim
to be him. I detest the obvious lie,

beneath layers of self-deception
however find it hard to say no.
Are they yours? customers ask.

One woman peers down an alley
at the end of which is a steeple
burnt out against the whitest sky.

I recognise that street. Is it Paris?
Yes, I say. What were you doing there?
She tips her head to one side. *I think I was lost.*

After Atget – a sequence

(i)

It's tempting to imagine this part of the sky
as being identical with that one, divided
as they are only by the viaduct's gentle
line. This is the sort of place where
you'd bump into an old friend, exchange
half-hearted thanks and praise, only to
leave and feel you'd somehow misjudged
how much you liked her in the first place.
For years afterwards you wonder if things
might have been different. This place, for you
is haunted by her but she wasn't of here,
it was pure chance. The decadence,
the low tide, the pale sky reflected
in the water all of this helps you to
arrange your bitterness (regret?) into a shape
you can recognise. Sounds of the village – a
far off swoop of traffic, children in a nearby
park – pile on the confusion. You wrestle
with the memory as many have done before you.

(ii)

The plastic chairs have been chained
to the tables overnight. The awning doesn't cover
them so the outliers are left in the rain.

Alone at one table inside, a woman
in a green dress. The barman is polishing
glasses behind the counter. She taps her cigarette

into the Ricard ashtray, leaves her coffee
untouched. Jazz on the radio, the rain,
even mist on the river holding no promise.

(iii)

You painted this triptych tromp l'oeil in my bathroom
so that not only is the space bigger but I'm in
a field, a jungle-scape, and the foothills
of a distant city all at once. It's the room
where I most feel like dancing, as if bathroom
and ballroom are really not so far apart.

Alighting on the field I see a haystack
settled in its perfect form. It has gathered
within itself all the field's goodness
and fashioned it to a peak. Bare
trees at the boundary stand guard
offering subtle protection though not from wind
or sun. The stony ground looks like
the bottom of the sea. I'm in my bath
having ideas, but the next moment, I'm shaving,
gliding across the barewood floors.
I have a partner and he's dipping me,
it's tea dances at Blackpool Winter
Gardens all over again and off in the distant
hills there's a city we will one day reach.

(iv)

That was what happened on my first day
back from the Underworld. By then, feeling
like the Prince of Second Chances I wept
for every leaf on the eucalyptus tree, every
ripple in the fountain switched off at the end
of the boulevard, every man in a hat
every scholar in a gown, every woman
with a child, an umbrella, a smile.
The morning was still and bright.
Nothing could be said of what had happened
to me yet in my heart I wanted to shout
from the rooftops. Walking and sitting still
all seemed the same to me, everywhere
the rush of excitement, the wash of tenderness.
Invincible, I made my first attempts
at language, each word a gold rush
minted on my awkward, terrible tongue.

The Lost Ships of Pisa

My love was on a cargo ship
carrying almond oil and peaches
down the coast, he would have stopped
in Pisa to take on board more relics
from the churches and the hospitals.

Everything had to be taken somewhere
else, if only to bury it, to let it
sail away. He made sure, my captain,
that each mate board had a candle-
holder to see him to his bunk.

He made sure they worked hard too
but there was no cruelty in his manner
just a sense of what had to be done.
I met him in the portside tavern
in Livorno where I shouldn't have been

one Saturday night. We spoke about
the farm I owned, the olive groves,
how I might expand overseas.
There was something impossible
in my love from the start. Inevitable too,

as though each had met his match.
We plotted then over the weeks and months
to be sure his craft was best built
and that my land was richest and most
productive. I was due to be married.

When he was cabined I hoped
that he might think of me. We didn't write.
I travelled once to La Spezia
by night. I had to meet a merchant
there and the captain was dry docked

after a calamity with the steering.
All his men had to be let go.
We met in a trade hall
and swapped stories. My harvest
was also now a waiting game.

What light would you hold,
and for whom, on your last voyage?
I hope like hell that someone
held him before the storm and flood
but it's hard to keep myself

entirely out of the picture.
I wonder if by his light he might
have read some of my poems.
Writing is my body, given to him
that he might take me in.

This transubstantiation would be
enough to keep me alive.
It might just have saved him too,
to know our love had found words,
was made real between us.

The Infinite

Strange to find you here
 a handkerchief dropped
on this lonesome hill
 bearing your monogram.

There is no view of the white sails
 that will be dabbing the horizon,
and no sound of the sea.
 Just the widest sky over all

the Burnhams. The boundaries
 of Gong Lane and the hedge
are no container for the vast
 space into which my father

now has gone. Emptiness
 and nothingness
tip in the scales against
 heartsong of your love.

Handkerchief with your monogram
 crumples in my hand. I can't hear
the waves but I know this wreck,
 this wreck is my salvation.

Leopardi: L'infinito

Pennyfields

There's something I never told you.
Or maybe I did but we didn't speak about it,
not directly, anyhow. But you knew
and I knew you knew. Perhaps you are cross
with me now as I didn't tell you.
Is there anything you needed to let me know?
Time can conquer most things: secrets
like to be held on to, it's what they do best
but breaking silences has a poetry too.

I think it was told between the lines. If only
I was reading you and you were reading me.
But now you have left the interpreted life
and may have gained – or I may have gained –
another sense of what was being said.
A conversation taking fifty years with all
its pauses and hesitations and interruptions
is bound to be prone to misreadings,
one of us was bound to lose the thread.

If you want to whisper something to me
you can do it now. I am so sorry you had to go.
The picture on my wall you gave me, of the house
where I was born, fell one evening just like that.
The string broke. For more than twenty years
it had held fast. I bound it tight and hung it
back up in those last months when you were so ill.
The beginning of my life; the end of yours.
A span of fifty years: framed speech and silence.

First Day on the Island Without You

What are we looking at
when we look out to sea?

This evening's look is
simply to say, Thank You.

The Atlantic rolls in.
Nothing is happening.

And then, quite out of season
a seal pops up, looking back

towards me on the shore.
I leap to my feet, and I wave.

Love Song with a Sandcar

I am making a sandcar for my son
patting down the bonnet, scooping out
the seat and chassis. This thin wafer
fixed by water is the windscreen,
reminding us that glass is made of sand
not the other way around.

The dunes, we know, are sea shaped
speaking back to the waves, as if they
too know how to break. The waves
are dune shaped, lapping and lipping
at the shore, pouring and clawing in
claim and counterclaim. I am making

a sandcar for my daughter. She climbs in.
She sits in the damp seat, feels cold grains
at her feet where I've told her the pedals will be.
She pats the sides of the car. It's a racer.
The beach is hers to drive and hold.
I put seashells at the front for headlights,

four big stones at the base for wheels.
The radiator's made of seaweed;
seagull feathers are go-faster stripes.
I am making a sandcar for my son.
Except, what son? What daughter?
I am making a sandcar for my father.

Mimesis

It's our anniversary. Van Gogh copied
Hokusai so it seems, or borrowed features
of his compositions at least, without attribution.

Flaring into light, the apple blossoms
are Van Gogh in all his (their) luminosity,
and who can say who's copied who to notice it.

Perhaps I have copied you, or else we had
the same thought twice, in two minds, as we looked
from the bedroom window—you pointed out

again, how those petals made the world shake.
They were on the branch less vividly you reckon,
last year, but were bright like this the year before.

I will wait another twelvemonths and see what
they might bring. The Spring has you quoting Larkin,
my songbird, as we hear and see the world *afresh*.

Floodtide in the Morning

I used to like low tide, how everything is gone
leaving just seagull cries, the clatter of rigging
against metal masts, the current slowed to a trickle.

Then I might have said I loved a floodtide at sunset,
that weird admixture of death and completion, the drama
of ending on a high. But Baby, now I know what it is like

to have a heart that is full, the sheer joy of waves slapping
at the coastal footpath, threatening to breach all defences.
I am lifted up so high that anything caught on the swell is

bobbing and spinning and agitated. Anyone caught looking
is getting their feet wet, and they too feel the miracle of plenty
where you are walking towards me, walking on water.

A Screen for Elizabeth and May

Dog's bark, birdcall in the gorse,
end of day conversation wrapped up
in the wind. Everything's a screen:
the ragged curtain of cows draped
across the hilltop, cloud puffs,
crows in flight, a mother's praise—
Annabel? Well done you!

Nothing's such that we can get
behind the image, the sea's surface
half silvered in mother-of-pearl,
that man's red jumper marching behind
his black dog as they move downhill.
At all of this we point a camera:
we admire the day's gentle touch,
wish for such a contact always.

On the next hill the army explodes
cannon, rattles off gunfire within safe range.
That man's bare chest looks nice in the sunlight,
my hair's being blown across my scalp.
The list of my impressions is a sorry,
sorry song. But if it could sing
through to you, if you or I could peek
behind the screen, how we would wave!

*Two Best Friends: Reading as a Writer
in Elizabeth Bishop and May
Swenson—a critical thesis*

Dominic McLoughlin

Introduction

In the summer of 1986 I took a job as a bookseller at *Books & Co* on Madison Avenue at 74th Street, an independent bookstore in Manhattan, just next door to the Whitney Museum. It was not well paid but one of the perks was a licence to choose volumes to take home and keep. Once I chose Auden's *Homage to Clio*,¹ but no sooner had I left work for the evening than I discovered I had left the book on the back seat of a taxi cab. As a friend said at the time, "Easy come, easy go!" On another occasion I took home a paperback copy of Elizabeth Bishop's *Geography III*.² This volume of poems has stayed with me for almost thirty years since. It is hard to think what my life would have been like without it. I make this dramatic statement not as a poet, but, first and foremost, as a reader. This thesis is about reading, and how reading poetry relates to the writing of it. Why is it that some books slip through our fingers, while others stay with us forever?

The terms of the discussion are informed by the work of D.W. Winnicott, whose book *Playing and Reality*³ is another that I consider to have changed my life. I remember the precise moment during an interview for post-graduate studies when I was first told about it; I had an instant sense of life being different. The notion of reading being about relationships – akin to falling in love – suggested that psychoanalytic theory might be helpful as a means of speaking about the dynamics of literary exchange. Joanne Feit Diehl's book on Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore at once demonstrates the rewards and risks of this approach. Diehl suggests that object-relations theory can be applied to both the process of reading, wherein it 'offers a helpful redirection of questions of literary influence', and to relationships, specifically 'the Bishop-Moore relationship as it manifests itself in the poetry'.⁴ Diehl skilfully draws on the post-Freudian work of Melanie Klein, and a later psychoanalytic theorist Christopher Bollas whose ideas on the development of the human person are explored

¹ W.H. Auden, *Homage to Clio* (London: Faber, 1960)

² Elizabeth Bishop, *Geography III* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978)

³ D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1971)

⁴ Joanne Feit Diehl, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore: The Psychodynamics of Creativity* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 7.

in *The Shadow of the Object*.⁵ The Kleinian perspective includes, for instance, the key concepts of depressive and paranoid-schizoid positions which, Klein believes, are organised to allow us to make use of projections; powerful feelings, she says, for example, need to be variously split off or integrated into the subject of the whole person.⁶ Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick has also made use of Kleinian ideas, for example in the concept of paranoid and reparative reading, and this work would certainly have some resonance with readings of Bishop and Swenson.⁷ Yet my concern, within in the limitations of this study, is to focus attention on reading as a writer and the process of literary influence as it has affected me. For this purpose, Winnicottian theory has most relevance. The application of theories of human development to the cultural sphere is a project that Winnicott began himself in ‘The Location of Cultural Experience’.⁸ Here, the concern is not to explain the origin of artistic activity, as Freud had begun with ideas of sublimation, but rather, to ‘tell us where in the mind cultural experience is’.⁹ This emphasis on location is picked up in the title of an essay by Murray M. Schwartz who asks ‘Where is Literature?’.¹⁰ In this essay, Schwartz uses Winnicott’s idea of ‘potential space’ to reconcile the objectivity required of students of literary studies with the subjective response literature necessarily demands.

Winnicott’s concepts of ‘potential space’ and the use of ‘transitional objects’ provides a theoretical framework for learning and creative development not just in literature but in any sphere. For Winnicott, the filling in of the potential space is what gives the infant the capacity to survive the loss of the [maternal] carer in her inevitable failure to meet his/her needs. In ‘good enough’ mothering—where the infant knows that the mother will return eventually and that [s]he is not facing a catastrophic loss—the infant is able to make use of transitional objects to console itself through which [s]he

⁵ Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object—Psychoanalysis of the unthought known* (London: Free Association Books, 1987)

⁶ Melanie Klein and Juliet Mitchell, *The Selected Melanie Klein* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986). p. 20

⁷ Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, ‘Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes’ in *After Sex?: On Writing Since Queer Theory*, ed. by Janet E. Halley and Andrew Parker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 283–301.

⁸ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, pp. 95–103.

⁹ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 95

¹⁰ Peter L. Rudnytsky, *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces: Literary Uses of D.W. Winnicott* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 50–62.

can gain an appreciation of the boundaries between ‘not-me’ and ‘me’. Through this process the child gains a capacity to be alone, to play, to relax, and to concentrate:

The baby’s confidence in the mother’s reliability, and therefore in that of other people and things, makes possible a separating-out of the not-me from the me. At the same time, however, it can be said that separation is avoided by the filling in of the potential space with creative playing, with the use of symbols, and with all that eventually adds up to a cultural life.¹¹

Winnicott’s ideas also lend themselves well to an understanding of the negotiation between subjective and objective modes of experience that is such a vital dynamic in the work of Elizabeth Bishop. *Geography III* is a book of poems that is full of transitional objects itself— from the *National Geographic* magazine of ‘In the Waiting Room’, to the knife in ‘Crusoe in England’, to the curious creature appearing out of the woods in ‘The Moose’, to the endearing landscape painting in ‘Poem’. Repeatedly and insistently, the reader is given the opportunity to play with meanings and feeling states, and thus to forget themselves in what Bishop calls ‘perfectly useless concentration’.¹² The state of reverie is also often conjured by the depiction of a series of rooms or enclosed spaces: a waiting room, an aeroplane cabin, a shack near the beach, a night-bus, a bedroom in the early morning which might be considered as potential spaces.

What is at stake then, in Winnicottian terms, is the creation of ‘the place where we live’. Rather than a therapeutic space, it is ‘the place, using the word in an abstract sense, where we most of the time are when we are experiencing life’.¹³ The enduring appeal and great value of Bishop’s work for ordinary readers is the occupation of a place that is recognizable, even familiar – even if we do not quite know why. This is a place which acknowledges the pain of loss and how, as in ‘Five Flights Up’, the days sometimes feel ‘impossible to lift’. In contrast to the isolation that is ultimately rejected in ‘The End of March’,¹⁴ where one would be reduced to reading ‘long,

¹¹ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 109.

¹² Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess, *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), p. 288.

¹³ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 104.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems, Prose, and Letters* (New York: The Library of America, 2008), pp. 167-169, hereafter cited as *PPL*.

boring books', it is a social, rather than solitary space. This creative space grants the freedom for personal engagement and spontaneity enough to say, 'Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!' as in 'Poem'. In summary, it is also a place of intimacy. Yet, crucially, it is not a place for the confessional. Bishop's gift in the eyes of her greatest critics—including David Kalstone, Langdon Hammer, and Bonnie Costello—is to be able to create a sense of intimacy between writer and reader that does not rely on the revelation of personal secrets. Bishop was writing at a time when confessional poetry found its voice with her close friend and mentor Robert Lowell, one of its key innovators. For Lowell, together with a melding of autobiographical facts and poetic truth, the subject of the person in history was fundamental to his poetics. Conversely, Bishop had her own views on how one should handle the paradox of separating out 'life and the memory of it',¹⁵ another negotiation central to her poetics.

Winnicott's theoretical framework and object relations perspective, then, enables us to see the value of Bishop's poetry as a transitional space allowing for the intersubjectivity of writer and reader. Alongside this reader/writer relationship, this thesis also seeks to illuminate my own reading process. It has taken time to sit longer with the poems, reading them for themselves without projecting my own 'meanings' onto them. This process is what Winnicott meant by 'the capacity to be alone'.¹⁶ As Kleinian thought reminds us, human development is not just about the stages that we pass through sequentially once and for all, but is better seen as an oscillation between positions, wherein we struggle to tolerate depressive states without the projection of unwanted feelings onto other objects. Under pressure a mature adult will resort to such paranoid-schizoid mechanisms—including, in reading, projecting unwanted ideas and feelings onto other texts and other writers. In maturity, the capacity to be alone means, for the writer, a constant and vigilant negotiation between 'not-me' and 'me'. This process is of course fraught, not only because of the personal anxieties which very often cause the poet to want to write in the first place, but because of the problem of writing itself. In Bonnie Costello's view, Bishop's poetry rises above the binaries of inside/outside and subject/object, both by questioning the terms and

¹⁵ *PPL*, p. 166

¹⁶ D. W Winnicott *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment : Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (London: Karnac and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1990), pp. 29–36.

locating the problem of interpretation in the text of the poem itself.¹⁷ In Bishop's work, there is rarely any firm boundary between the inside and the outside. Nor is there any final access to knowledge, nor key to interpretation. Accordingly, the impossibility of knowing and being known can tend to leave us frustrated, like a child banging on the door wanting to be let in.

Chapter One looks at the activity of reading as a writer in relation to Bishop and Winnicott. My intention here is to speak about writing from an artisan's point of view. This is a vast topic in terms of its history in literary theory and creative writing pedagogy. For reasons of space, I have focussed on the history of creative writing in higher education in relation to the term 'reading as a writer'. For the same reason of limitations of space, I restrict the discussion in this thesis to my experience of reading two writers who matter to me, and tracing something of their own reading. Thus Chapter Two discusses Bishop's reading of a poet who was important to her, Gerard Manley Hopkins. I notice in this chapter how, in order to develop her own conception of 'a mind thinking', Bishop makes use of Hopkins's attention to the temporal. One important feature of literary exchange in this chapter is the difference between how we relate to writers who are living and how we relate to writers who are dead. Bishop's notion, adapted from Eliot,¹⁸ was that inter-generational poetic voices are continually to be heard in 'great whispering galleries'.¹⁹ Her sense was not just that later writers affect the ones who have come before them, but that the whole idea of chronology was questionable in literature as in life where the order in which events take place is far from being a matter of simple linear movement. Chapter Three examines Bishop's reading of May Swenson, a contemporary and a friend who, during Bishop's process of articulating her poetics, acted as something of a foil. Their correspondence has been seen by Kirstin Hotelling Zona in the context of Bishop's mentorship by Marianne Moore.²⁰ My aim is to show how some of the mutual 'carefulness' between Bishop and Swenson set their transactions quite *apart* from

¹⁷ Bonnie Costello, 'Elizabeth Bishop's Impersonal Personal', *American Literary History*, 15 (2003), 334–66.

¹⁸ See, T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in *Selected Prose* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), p. 21–30

¹⁹ *PPL*, p. 674

²⁰ Kirstin Hotelling Zona, 'May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop', in *Body My House: May Swenson's Work and Life*, ed. by Paul Crumbley and Patricia M. Gantt, (Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2006), pp. 55–80.

Bishop's dialogues with Moore and Lowell, instead establishing the tone for a poetics that was intimate and personal without being confessional. Chapter Four reverses the process to notice how Swenson read Bishop. Swenson is one of Bishop's most astute readers in virtue of her ability to hold in balance the public and the private sense of self, and to accept Bishop's own ways of measuring natural fact and poetic truth. Although Swenson is confident as to Bishop's genius and has the capacity to learn from her about how it works, she is also able to scrutinize Bishop's position.

In Chapters Three and Four I chart the character of the correspondence between Bishop and Swenson, so as to lay the groundwork for my subsequent enquiry into what connections can be made between the mode of dialogue they used and the way the general reader is positioned in Bishop's poems. In Chapter Five I articulate which Bishop poems have greatest resonance for me. I choose particularly those Bishop poems that make use of questions and parenthetical remarks. I discuss how such rhetorical and grammatical devices function to position the reader in a fine balance between the personal and the autobiographical. Despite her protestations that her poems were 'all description, no philosophy', I turn to the questions of epistemology and aesthetics raised in her work to prepare for my final chapter on my own work. In Chapter Six space is given to my own poems in *Pennyfields*. I highlight poems that are philosophical in character which often make a comment on the relationship with the reader, and those that signal a movement from the personal to the communal. The narrative of the thesis is therefore about a trajectory from being alone to finding a community of readers; this work makes a journey from solitary reading to friendship and love.

Chapter One – Reading as a Writer

I

Herbert, Hopkins and Baudelaire are claimed by Elizabeth Bishop as being the poets she considers her ‘best friends’.²¹ I use this figure of speech in the title of this thesis to indicate that Elizabeth Bishop and May Swenson meant a great deal to one another and also mean a great deal to me as a poet. How is such a relationship established and maintained? What is its value for the development of a poet? Can identifying the quality of attention and the nature of the interaction in such a relationship be used to define a poetics? The friendship I am concerned with here is established through reading: Bishop reading Swenson, Swenson reading Bishop, and my reading of both. Bishop and Swenson were contemporaries and had a personal alliance from the time of their first meeting in 1950 until Bishop’s death in 1979. At times they provided practical and emotional help to one another, even at times of greatest need: for example, when Bishop returned to New York from Brazil after the death of her partner Lota de Macedo Soares, it was to May Swenson that she turned for a place of safety. This level of personal commitment helped to define the character of their professional bond, which was coloured by a variety of other factors, not least their respective standing in the literary culture of their day.

On one level they had a lot in common, both personally—as women poets in a male-dominated literary culture and as lesbians at a time when homophobia was prevalent in society—and artistically, as poets who were avowedly not confessional.²² Yet despite their points of poetic difference, even of opposition, they found ways to articulate their appreciation of one another’s work. Their remarks were aimed at analysing, praising, and where possible improving the poems. The exchanges took place by correspondence, and the existing letters therefore provide a record of how these comments were delivered and received. The correspondence with Swenson brings out particular qualities which are not present in Bishop’s correspondence with

²¹ Elizabeth Bishop, *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2006), p. 208.

²² “Neither of us writes confessional poetry” May Swenson, *May Swenson: Made with Words*, ed. by Gardner McFall (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), p. 122, hereafter cited as *MWW*.

Marianne Moore or Robert Lowell.²³ Poetic knowledge was being created in dialogue. At the same time, as I will show, it was a paradoxical kind of knowledge that relied upon not knowing, or ‘negative capability’. The key element here is that the negotiation of poetic truth was conducted in an atmosphere of uncertainty and doubt. Even though Bishop was the senior party and the more eminent poet, she did not set herself up as the one who knows best. For example, she prefaces her critical comments by saying almost apologetically to Swenson that she is well aware of ‘the kind of thing critics carp about’: ‘It’s the one thing in which I have an advantage over you—I did start earlier and have slightly more experience of that sort, I think.’²⁴ In return, when reading her mentor, Swenson plays down own her interpretive skills. Writing in September 1953 to Bishop about her poem ‘The Shampoo’, Swenson stresses the value of aesthetics over conceptual meaning: ‘I wouldn’t hazard a decision that it means thus and so and can’t possibly mean something else. It’s beautifully made.’²⁵

It is this tone of mutual respect and humility which defines the quality of attention given to the poems throughout their correspondence. The resulting forum can be characterised as a facilitating environment, to use the term provided by D.W. Winnicott, the British paediatrician and psychoanalyst who theorized the nature of maternal care from a post-Freudian perspective. Winnicott made a distinctive contribution in the field of human development based on extensive experience of working with infants and young children and wrote a number of clinical papers throughout the 1950s and 1960s. His paper ‘Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena’ (1953) was the foundation for the seminal book *Playing and Reality*, which was completed shortly before his death in 1971. Winnicott’s writing style is questioning, thoughtful and conversational, exhibiting some of the negative capability on which his ideas were based: ‘For a long time my mind remained in a state of not-knowing, this state crystallizing into my formulation of the transitional phenomena.’²⁶

²³ This comparison is too vast a topic to take on here. The nature of the influence on Bishop by Moore and Lowell is the subject of David Kalstone’s masterful study, *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell* (London: Hogarth Press, 1989).

²⁴ ‘May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop Correspondence’, p. 1, 04 June 1958 <http://digital.wustl.edu/r/revision/Swenson_Collaboration/EBtoMS19580604.html> [accessed 12 August 2013].

²⁵ *MWW*, p. 201.

²⁶ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 96.

A crucial point of overlap between Winnicott's concerns in the therapeutic realm and Bishop's in the literary is the common interest in the negotiation between inner and outer experience, what Winnicott calls 'the exciting interweave of subjective and objective observation.'²⁷ His ideas are particularly valuable for their applied use to the realm of ordinary human creativity and culture. For example, Winnicott's notion of a 'potential space' is a third area in between the infant's internal feelings and the external world. In terms of human development, inhabiting and making use of the potential space is how we learn to balance the pressing needs of our innate desires and appetites with a capacity to wait and to be uncertain. The things that help us to inhabit this space as an infant are the facilitating environment created by the carer and our growing capacity for object use. According to Winnicott, a feature of our engagement with the world at this stage is to make use of 'transitional objects' which are our first encounter with phenomena that are 'not me'.²⁸ Transitional objects function as comforters that help us to manage unbearable anxieties. In particular, they teach us the possibility of tolerating loss. In infancy they may be a teddy bear or a favourite blanket, and in adult life they take the form of any object in the cultural field. An essential feature of transitional objects is that they are partly found and partly made—that is they are invested with meaning by the infant and are therefore to that extent in his control.

For me, this links back to the idea of poets having other poets as 'best friends' in the sense that they are instances of 'not me' that are invested with special meaning. They are not handed down by an externally validated authority and not necessarily the same as 'the best poets—whom we all admire'.²⁹ Rather, they are an inevitable consequence of an individual's own poetic make up. Winnicott makes it clear that he is not concerned to develop a theory of art and artists: 'the creativity that concerns me here is a universal. It belongs to being alive'.³⁰ The idea of a potential space and a facilitating environment make themselves available to explain the conditions needed for learning and for creative thinking in any sphere. It is an environment which allows for a kind of formless play. The link between playing in childhood and adult cultural experience may seem far-fetched, but Murray M. Schwartz, in his chapter

²⁷ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 64.

²⁸ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 3.

²⁹ Bishop, *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments*, p. 208.

³⁰ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 67.

‘Where is Literature?’, underlines its importance: ‘Winnicott has defined an area of experience at the point of its inception. If it seems perverse to suggest that literature is a teddy bear, I find it enlightening to realise what they have in common, the place of their meaningful experience for us, first as children, later as adults.’³¹ For Winnicott the ability to play becomes in adult life the ability to be creative in our apperception: ‘There is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing, and from playing to shared playing, and from this to cultural experiences’.³²

There is an added value in holding in mind Winnicott’s ideas in relation to the experience of reading Elizabeth Bishop. The title she gave her haunting account of studying in a quiet room at the top of the dormitory at boarding school was: ‘On Being Alone’. This youthful meditation (written in 1929 when she was just seventeen) was developed further in her undergraduate essay ‘Time’s Andromedas’ (1933) with its opening description of ‘studying very hard’ and how she was ‘expecting Heaven knows what sudden revelation’ when she became aware of a sunset: ‘My own thoughts, conflicting with those of the book, were making such a wordy racket that I heard and saw nothing—until the page before my eyes blushed pink.’³³ The concern of these first writings chimes with Winnicott’s 1958 paper ‘The Capacity to Be Alone’ where he stresses the developmental requirement for the infant to be able to be alone in the presence of the mother: ‘When alone in the sense that I am using the term, and only when alone, the infant is able to do the equivalent of what in an adult would be called relaxing.’³⁴ In a later paper ‘On Communication’, a further connection is made between ‘being alone in the presence of someone’ and ‘the capacity to concentrate on a task’.³⁵ What Bishop’s essays show and Winnicott’s theories explain is that in order to read (that is, to be alone in the presence of another) we do need to be able to manage the complex ‘wordy racket’ from within and without. It is this negotiation of subjective and objective experience which became a central idea throughout Bishop’s writing.

³¹ Rudnytsky, *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces*, p. 60.

³² Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 51.

³³ *PPL*, p. 641.

³⁴ Winnicott, *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment*, p. 34.

³⁵ Winnicott, *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment*, p. 188.

There are further similarities between the accounts of cultural experience as described by Winnicott and Bishop. In the chapter in *Playing and Reality* where he describes how playing is a key element in the ‘search for self’, Winnicott concludes that ‘searching can come only from desultory formless functioning, or perhaps from rudimentary playing, as in a neutral zone’. It is through the activity of play that,

[we] experience life in the area of transitional phenomena, in the exciting interweave of subjectivity and objective observation, and in an area that is intermediate between the inner reality of the individual and the shared reality of the world that is external to individuals.³⁶

Some of the meaning and even some of the music of this statement written in 1971 can be heard before its time in Elizabeth Bishop’s comment to Anne Stevenson in a letter of 8-20 January 1964, which in turn is reminiscent of Keats’s account of negative capability:

What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration.³⁷

For the purposes of my theses, what is so useful here is the sense that reader and writer are united in their shared capacity to concentrate with a marked absence of expediency or goal-orientation.

Winnicott acknowledges in the introduction to *Playing and Reality* that the idea of an ‘intermediate area’ has been set out before by philosophers, theologians and poets. Specifically, ‘It appears in full force in the work characteristic of the so-called metaphysical poets (Donne, etc.)’.³⁸ For a recent critique of Winnicott’s theories in relation to literary and art criticism, particularly in its identification of Winnicott’s effeminophobia, see Carol Mavor’s *Reading Boyishly*.³⁹ Along with Mavor I would claim to be inspired by Winnicott but am not without concerns for his world view

³⁶ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 64.

³⁷ Schwartz and Estess, *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, p. 288.

³⁸ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. xi.

³⁹ Carol Mavor, *Reading Boyishly: Roland Barthes, J. M. Barrie, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Marcel Proust, and D. W. Winnicott* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 72.

where a particular kind of maternal care is the answer to everything. To examine some of these ideas further a study could be undertaken of Winnicott's relationship to poetry in his clinical writings, for example the readings of Hopkins by one of his patients⁴⁰ and Winnicott's own attempts at writing poetry, which he admits is 'absolutely useless'.⁴¹ My concern here, however, is different. I aim to use the ideas of 'potential space' and 'transitional objects' to discuss the work of Bishop and Swenson, and to think about my practice of reading as a writer.

II

The leading Bishop scholar Langdon Hammer brings Winnicott to bear in his examination of the relationship between Bishop's letters and her poems in two different ways. First, the letters themselves can be usefully seen as inhabiting an in-between space that is neither the professional space of her poems nor the amateur space of ordinary friendship. Secondly, Hammer argues that the state of mind involved in 'perfectly useless concentration' required of reader and writer is made possible by our capacity to be held by the transitional object. In his analysis of Bishop's 'Poem' from *Geography III*, Hammer shows how an intricate series of relationships is built up between the writer and her subject, and between poem as object and writer and reader. 'Poem' takes as its starting point a description of a painting by the poet's uncle. Here, the painting functions as a transitional object. The poem begins with steady observation, constructing layers of meaning through close attention to the canvas. We are drawn into thinking about the difference between the marks, 'titanium white, one dab', and what they represent, 'his barn'. The poem then becomes a touching encounter between two artists at the moment of epiphany when the poet brings herself into the frame with the exclamation, 'Heavens, I recognise the place, I know it!' The drama of personal identification makes possible a different order of knowledge—for writer and for reader—not simply one reliant on factual accuracy. Once the personal connection has been made, a new kind of reverie can take place:

⁴⁰ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, pp. 57–64. For discussion of work with this patient, see Albert D. Hutter, 'Poetry in Psychoanalysis: Hopkins, Rossetti, Winnicott' in Rudnytsky, *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces*, p. 63–86.

⁴¹ D. W. Winnicott and others, *Home Is Where We Start from: Essays by a Psychoanalyst* (New York: Norton, 1986), p. 196.

I never knew him. We both knew the place,
apparently, this literal small backwater,
looked at it long enough to memorize it,
our years apart. How strange. And it's still loved,
or its memory is (it must have changed a lot).
Our visions coincided—"visions" is
too serious a word—our looks, two looks:
art "copying from life" and life itself,
life and the memory of it so compressed
they've turned into each other. Which is which? ⁴²

Drawing on Bishop's formulation quoted above, which importantly speaks to the activity of both reading and writing, Hammer sees that,

It is 'self-forgetful' concentration because in this state one's attention is absorbed by an object outside the self; to enter it is to enter the liminal, 'potential' space'
Winnicott speaks of, a space of reverie where the subject is 'held' by an object. ⁴³

Being held by a transitional object—a poem or work of art—allows us to tolerate tensions that are an inevitable consequence of the need to mediate between subjective and objective experience. Hammer proceeds in his discussion of Bishop's work:

Truth to objects is not the final concern of this art. Rather, the artist's relation to the world is the ground for an inter-subjective relation—an intimacy—between artist and audience. That is the situation in 'Poem', where the painter's relation to the world he paints is structured like the poet's relation to the painting she describes, which is in turn structured like the reader's relation to 'Poem'.

Understood this way, art comes to seem like a form of personal correspondence (rather than the other way around).⁴⁴

⁴² *PPL*, p. 166.

⁴³ Langdon Hammer, 'Useless Concentration: Life and Work in Elizabeth Bishop's Letters and Poems', *American Literary History*, 9 (1997), 162–80 (p. 175).

⁴⁴ Langdon Hammer, 'Useless Concentration: Life and Work in Elizabeth Bishop's Letters and Poems', p. 175.

An awful lot depends on that order of priority. In cases where personal correspondence is used as a means of making art there can be serious casualties. In Elizabeth Bishop's view, as she said to Robert Lowell when he had used his wife's letters to make a poem without her permission, 'art just isn't worth that much'.⁴⁵ Lowell's confessional stance saw him exercising different priorities, focussing on the value of examining the person in history, and drawing on autobiography as the source for creative material. Winnicott's idea of a transitional space, and Langdon Hammer's use of this to capture an essential part of Bishop's poetics, allows us to see how a different kind of intimacy—one that does not involve the betrayal of personal confidences—can be created. This is an intimacy that is inter-subjective—writer and reader are joined in a creative interaction that allows them to mediate between inner and outer worlds. It is this sense of respectful, disinterested collaboration that I identify in the correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and May Swenson. In turn, my appreciation of the value of such a playful yet serious engagement is something I use to provide a context for my reading of their work and later for the development of my own creative practice.

III

The term 'reading as a writer' has a technical application in the history of creative writing pedagogy, but also has a common sense meaning when applied to the work of the poet-critic. Emerson's essay 'The American Scholar' carries the first mention of 'creative writing', and it does so in a way that defines it less as a form of self-expression and more as close study of literature as a living art form: 'There are creative manners, there are creative actions, and creative words; manners, actions, words, that is, indicative of no custom or authority, but springing spontaneous from the mind's own sense of good and fair.'⁴⁶ And a little later he goes on to say, 'One must be an inventor to read well ... There is then creative reading as well as creative writing.'⁴⁷ From the very beginning of the development of creative writing in the universities sector in the United States, there was attention given to the place of reading in the educational process. D.G. Myers shows in his paper 'The Rise of

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art: Letters Selected & Edited by Robert Giroux* (London: Pimlico, 1996), p. 562.

⁴⁶ Ralph Emerson, *Selected Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 89.

⁴⁷ Emerson, *Selected Essays* p. 90.

Creative Writing’ that it was Hughes Mearns who first taught the new discipline under that name in New York in the 1920s.⁴⁸ One of Mearns’s innovations was to review the reading set for creative writing students. In fact, students were given licence to side-line the literary canon in favour of their own choices: ‘Students sought out their own reading, and since they were struggling with the problem of writing they naturally turned for answers to contemporary writers.’⁴⁹ In Myers’s account, Mearns believed he had recovered an old method of teaching writing which he called ‘creative reading’. Mearns continues, ‘it is what many teachers of creative writing still claim to be teaching, although under a still newer term: reading as a writer’.⁵⁰ The distinctive feature of this practice was its vocational component, the sense in which something was being undertaken in order to improve the student’s writing practice. Myers’s book-length history *The Elephants Teach* provides a full account of the origins of creative writing as an academic discipline in the United States. As he reveals, another pioneering teacher, R.V. Cassill from Iowa University, who went on to set up the creative writing programme at Brown in 1966, ‘defined “reading as a writer” as the kind of literary study that distinguishes creative writing from on-the-job training of journalism on the one hand and from literary scholarship on the other’:

Good writers are interested in something more than the application of commercial formulas, and so they must study texts in addition to principles. Unlike scholars, though, they are not particularly interested in determining the sources of literary texts. Above all they are interested in how texts are *made*.⁵¹

Whilst this is a useful definition and clearly a foundational one for creative writing as a discipline, I am not employing the term ‘reading as a writer’ in this narrow sense. My concern is to notice how two particular poets who matter to me engaged with poets who might be considered their ‘best friends’. The intention then is not so much to understand how their own poems are made in a technical sense, rather to notice what the quality of attention they pay in their reading makes possible for their own creative work.

⁴⁸ D. G. Myers, ‘The Rise of Creative Writing’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 54 (1993), 277–97 (p. 288).

⁴⁹ Myers, ‘The Rise of Creative Writing’, p. 290.

⁵⁰ Myers, ‘The Rise of Creative Writing’, p. 291.

⁵¹ D. G. Myers, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*, New edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 158–9.

There is another dimension to the term ‘reading as a writer’ which requires consideration here. There is an often repeated view that a poet’s account of their reading amounts to a description of their own work by indirect means. For example this idea is expressed by Seamus Heaney in ‘The Fire i’ the Flint—Reflections on the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins’. He is referring to Hopkins’s critical appreciation of Keats: ‘As is so often the case when a poet is diagnosing the condition of another poet, Hopkins is here offering us something of a self-portrait.’⁵² In strikingly similar terms, Paul Muldoon assumes this phenomenon to be well-known when remarking on Edward Thomas’s assessment of Robert Frost: ‘As we know to be so often the case with writers’ comments on other writers, the very insight Thomas affords into Frost’s poetic practice affords an even greater insight into his own.’⁵³ This concept is formalised by Eliot Weinberger in his introduction to Susan Howe’s seminal study *My Emily Dickinson*.⁵⁴ In providing a context for the book he argues that there is a tradition of ‘Indirect Criticism’, beginning with Jean Cocteau, which relies on a distinction between ‘writers’ and ‘critics’. As he puts it: ‘Critics explain their subjects; in writers’ books, the subject is explaining the author.’⁵⁵ Therefore, Howe’s achievement is doubled in that Emily Dickinson explains Susan Howe’s poetics and yet it is also true that her study of Dickinson added hugely to an understanding of a great American poet, rescuing her from her treatment as an uneducated, unbalanced recluse, on the basis of Howe’s conviction that ‘the way to understand her writing is through her reading’. In *My Emily Dickinson*, Dickinson is examined not through psychoanalysis, but as a poet-scholar, which in turn reflects back on how we might view Susan Howe herself.

I make only limited use of the concept of ‘Indirect Criticism’ for the current thesis. This is because both of my subjects wrote little in the way of reviews or literary criticism. However it is remarkable, given this, that they do both happen to have written about the same poet. One of the very few reviews that Elizabeth Bishop

⁵² Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978: Selected Prose, 1968-78*, New Ed edition (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 86.

⁵³ Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Faber, 2006), p. 89.

⁵⁴ Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (New York: New Directions, 2007).

⁵⁵ Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* p. xii.

published was of the letters of Emily Dickinson,⁵⁶ and one of the few critical essay by May Swenson was also on Dickinson, ‘Big My Secret, But it’s Bandaged’.⁵⁷ Furthermore it could be argued that these two works do make themselves available to be read as Indirect Criticism. Bishop’s review expresses some reservations about Dickinson’s letters, but comes to the powerful conclusion that ‘these letters have structure and strength’. Bishop continues with a remarkable image to describe Dickinson’s writing ‘it is the sketchiness of the water-spider, tenaciously holding to its upstream position by means of the faintest ripples, while making one aware of the current of death and the darkness below’.⁵⁸ This has been seen as a form of self-commentary on her letters by Langdon Hammer who says that the conceit ‘movingly evokes the tension between spoken and unspoken things in Bishop’s own correspondence’.⁵⁹ May Swenson’s analysis of Dickinson’s life and work has a similar mirroring effect if we notice that she says her subject has ‘an explorer’s mind’ and that ‘she needed to give vent to her great rushes of feeling and thought’⁶⁰ which together capture some of Swenson’s own trademark curiosity and ebullience.

However, given such a limited range of critical writing by Bishop and Swenson, I focus instead on the extensive critical commentary that is provided by both poets in their other published prose and letters. My intention is not to develop a theory of reading, but to provide my reading of their reading of each other in the context of creative writing pedagogy. The pedagogical context is a local rather than a general one in the sense that I have taught the module ‘Reading as a Writer’ on the Creative Writing MA at Royal Holloway during the period of this doctoral study. Paul Dawson in *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* identifies ‘reading as a writer’ as one of the three key phrases which circulate within discussions of creative writing pedagogy and therefore he sees it as revealing of the theory of poetry that underpins such educational events (the other two being ‘show, don’t tell’ and ‘discovering a voice’).⁶¹ My approach to teaching the module at Royal Holloway followed the lines

⁵⁶ *PPL*, p. 689-691.

⁵⁷ *MWW*, pp. 143–171.

⁵⁸ *PPL*, p. 690.

⁵⁹ Langdon Hammer, ‘Useless Concentration: Life and Work in Elizabeth Bishop’s Letters and Poems’ p. 172.

⁶⁰ *MWW*, pp. 153–4.

⁶¹ Paul Dawson, *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 90.

of the argument of this thesis. That is, it involved asking students to choose poets that mattered to them and asking them to link their choices to aspects of their own poetics.

The module 'Reading as a Writer' provides students with an awareness of their own creative co-ordinates. My present thesis reveals that there is an additional benefit: Elizabeth Bishop and May Swenson are not involved in creative writing pedagogy in an institutional context, but what we see in their exchanges is how the notion of having poetic 'best friends' leads to a carefulness in response which is close to the quality of discussion in a typical workshop—one writer comments on another's work as a fellow writer and both parties learn from that engagement. Reading as a writer in the local sense that it is used here therefore provides a method for responding to material presented in a creative writing workshop—a community of writers in an institutional setting—where poems are made available to act as transitional objects, and where the workshop can function as potential space, facilitating a shared creative and critical endeavour.

IV

The idea of the 'potential space' in Winnicott's sense provides a way of negotiating another tension in the present study. Elizabeth Bishop in the end pronounced May Swenson's poem about her, 'Dear Elizabeth', as 'a pretty good collaboration'.⁶² The correspondence over this is discussed in full in Chapter Three. Part of what is at stake in this correspondence is the difference between factual accuracy and poetic truth. That Swenson is making the poem out of lines from a letter to her from Bishop heightens the sense that authorship is already contested when one poet is commenting on another's work. How do poetic friendships survive such intimate exchanges? Who does the poem belong to after the revisions are made? Crucially, what are the principles involved in making such changes?

To begin to address the last question about the principles used to make aesthetic decisions, it is helpful to consider what might lie at the foundation of each poet's work philosophically. While still at Vassar, Bishop was probing the theory of

⁶² Richard Howard, 'Elizabeth Bishop-May Swenson Correspondence', in George Plimpton Ed, *The Paris Review Vol 36, No. 131: Summer, 1994*, p. 185.

literature and the notion of time in particular, wondering how to give ‘a clearer sense of things and people’.⁶³ This begins to suggest why Bishop’s poetry has been situated in relation to American pragmatist philosophy. Victoria Harrison in *Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Intimacy* points out that Bishop never made explicit any link between her interest in ‘a mind thinking’ and the principles of pragmatism. However, she was acquainted personally with John Dewey, and she did record her reading in the field. For example she writes in a letter to Isle and Kit Barker in March 1956 that she had read Henry and William James thoroughly in her youth and that because ‘Lota has a lot of Wm. James [, ...] I’ve been trying to cope with pragmatism again recently’.⁶⁴ Harrison puts the connection between William James and Bishop in terms of ‘a tradition that embraces them each’, summarised by Richard Rorty as a ‘vocabulary of practise rather than theory, of action rather than contemplation, in which one can say something useful about truth’.⁶⁵

Where Frances Dickey finds most philosophical resonance in Bishop is particularly in the version of pragmatism sponsored by Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey who place an emphasis on a ‘community of enquiry’. So that while the scientific method is seen as the paradigm of knowledge, there is also an acknowledgement that such inquiries cannot be undertaken alone: ‘The mutual checking, and confirmation carried out by members of the scientific community ensure the correctness of their investigative results’.⁶⁶ This chimes with Bishop’s aesthetic in so far as the poems seem to want to gravitate always away from the solitary and towards the social. We have seen this already in ‘Poem’ above where it is the contact with another, combined with personal recognition ‘Heavens, I recognise the place, I know it!’, that signals the beginning of a fresh kind of engagement with the work of art. The same trajectory—from the solitary observer to the creation of a more intimate, inter-subjective relationship—occurs within poems and within volumes, from ‘Chemin de Fer’ in *North & South*, to ‘The Moose’ and ‘The End of March’ in *Geography III*.⁶⁷

⁶³ *PPL*, p. 680.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Victoria Harrison, *Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Intimacy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 4

⁶⁵ Quoted in Harrison, *Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Intimacy*, p. 4

⁶⁶ Frances Dickey, ‘Bishop, Dewey, Darwin: What Other People Know’, *Contemporary Literature*, 44 (2003), pp. 301–31 (p. 303).

⁶⁷ In a discussion of ‘Cape Breton’ from *A Cold Spring*, Dickey points out: ‘As in many of Bishop’s poems, isolation from other people co-incides with a sense of limited knowledge’ in ‘Bishop, Dewey, Darwin: What Other People Know’ p. 301

The pragmatist model helps us to see that the poems are put to use in the service of knowledge. However, their value is not simply in sticking to the facts, although Bishop's protestations would make us think otherwise, for example when she says, 'I *always* tell the truth in my poems. With 'The Fish', that's *exactly* how it happened. Sometimes a poem makes its own demands. But I always *try* to stick as much as possible to what *really* happened when I describe something in a poem'.⁶⁸ Yet the kind of knowledge that her poems make available is of a different order, as mentioned above. Indeed, as Murray Schwartz puts it in 'Where is Literature?', all poetry takes occupies a space at one remove from 'Gradgridian Facts'.⁶⁹ Frances Dickey meanwhile builds on Langdon Hammer's notion that it is 'love' that underlies 'Bishop's creation of a "third space" of intimacy and disinterestedness, in which poetic activity can go ahead under her terms', as in the lines about the twice-loved place in 'Poem': 'And it's still loved, | or its memory is (it must have changed a lot).'⁷⁰ For Dickie, 'shared experience' provides a key to Elizabeth Bishop's poetry:

Bishop establishes [in 'Poem'] the relation between poet and painter on the basis of shared experience of a particular place; she establishes the relation between poet and audience on her assurances of the accuracy of her description. The confirmation she receives from the painting is the model of the confirmation she seeks from her audience. The two activities of description and confirmation are fundamental to knowledge, as they are to sociability.⁷¹

What this formulation provides is a view of Bishop's poetics that does not take at face value either the idea of empirical truth or her at times forceful statements of doubt about what can be known. It emphasises the importance of 'accuracy' of description. At the same time it underlines the value of sociability that Bishop places in the poems— a value that is also evident in her personal and professional relationships, not least in her friendship with May Swenson.

⁶⁸ Dickey, 'Bishop, Dewey, Darwin: What Other People Know', p. 310.

⁶⁹ Rudnytsky, *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces*, p. 58.

⁷⁰ *PPL*, p. 166.

⁷¹ Dickey, 'Bishop, Dewey, Darwin: What Other People Know', p. 329.

The way Swenson conceived of poetic knowledge seems at first sight to be in quite different terms. Michael Spooner gives an analysis of what Swenson meant when she said that writing poems was for her a combination of ‘knowledge achieved’ and ‘knowledge received’.⁷² The former is a matter of hard work and conscious effort, and the latter is something reliant on instinct or the subconscious. Swenson’s theory of writing is reliant on the idea of play, but as in Bishop it has a faith in its own efficacy as a mode of enquiry: ‘I feel that the artist and the scientist are after the same thing. They are after truth. The way things really are. And to make that actual to people.’⁷³ The full extent of this truth searching is unlimited for Swenson it seems: ‘What is the experience of poetry? ... I see it based in a craving to get through the curtain of things as they *appear* to things as they *are* and then into the larger, wilder space of things as they are *becoming*’.⁷⁴ This characterisation of things being in process has some resonance with Bishop’s interest in ‘a mind thinking’, a connection with one of her ‘best friends’ Gerard Manley Hopkins which is examined in more detail in the chapter to follow. We can see Bishop’s work in terms of the ‘community of enquiry’. There is also common ground through Swenson’s innate sociability and her poems’ interest in the couple, including the pairing of writer and reader. To see Swenson as a keen observer of the natural world is again to bring her close to Bishop’s starting point: from there, for both poets, the kinds of knowledge possible reach outwards into the philosophical. As Spooner says, Swenson ‘sharpens our perception of the nonphysical by bringing the physical so sharply to our senses—in her own terms.’⁷⁵ By bringing Bishop and Swenson together as ‘best friends’, I create a space for their sameness and difference to find expression. In the process I hope to say something about my own preoccupations as a poet who, like them, wants to make poems that are personal without being autobiographical; who also wants to rely on a form of intimacy with the reader; and who aims to point to something beyond appearances and towards the metaphysical.

⁷² Michael Spooner, ‘How Everything Happens: Notes on May Swenson’s Theory of Writing’, in *Body My House: May Swenson’s Work and Life*, ed. by Paul Crumbley and Patricia M. Gantt (Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2006), pp. 157–80 (p. 159).

⁷³ *MWW*, p. 118.

⁷⁴ *MWW*, p. 91.

⁷⁵ Spooner, ‘How Everything Happens: Notes on May Swenson’s Theory of Writing’, p. 165.

Chapter Two – Elizabeth Bishop reads Gerard Manley Hopkins

I

Elizabeth Bishop makes an important distinction between admiration and affection when discussing her literary influences. ‘The three qualities I admire in the poetry I like best are: Accuracy, Spontaneity, Mystery. My three “favourite” poets—not the best poets, whom we all admire, but favourite in the sense of one’s “best friends”, etc are Herbert, Hopkins, and Baudelaire.’¹ John Ashbery develops a similar contrast in the book of his Norton Lectures, *Other Traditions*. In the preamble to the first lecture (on John Clare), Ashbery makes the distinction between ‘major poets whom I feel as influences’ and ‘minor poets who have mattered to me’. In both cases he makes the point that ‘...one can’t choose one’s influences, they choose you, even though this can result in one’s list looking embarrassingly lopsided’. The effect of giving in to such tastes—or, to put it more actively, asserting one’s own personal authority—is to break the hegemony of any officially sanctioned canon of ‘best poets’. As set out in Chapter One, this is an important aspect of my understanding the concept of reading as a writer. In this light, becoming a poet in educational terms is a matter of setting your own curriculum rather than simply learning from the greats. In a writer’s response to literature one’s choices are sometimes embarrassing or nonsensical or not what you would like them to be. But to examine those choices and to wonder about their meaning is a valuable exercise in poetic self-knowledge.

The other key distinction made by Ashbery is between the poet and the scholar. ‘...since I am known to be a poet and not a scholar, indeed since I am known not to be a scholar, someone thought it might be interesting to have me talk about poetry from an artisan’s point of view’.² It is from this position that Ashbery goes on to reflect on the impetuses behind his poems. Thus a way of engaging with other poets is opened up that is not a scholarly one. Bishop similarly wants to create a space for poets to practice criticism in their own way. ‘I am not a critic’ she insists. ‘Critics can’t rest easy until they have put poets in descending orders of merit; they change the lists

¹ Elizabeth Bishop, *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments*, ed. by Alice Quinn, Reprint edition (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2007), p. 208.

² John Ashbery, *Other Traditions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 3–4.

every night before they go to bed. The poet doesn't have to be consistent.'³

I intend for my analysis to be scholarly precisely in so far as it examines scrupulously what it is to read 'from an artisan's point of view'.⁴ There is not the space to develop a complete theory of 'reading as a writer': my thesis is concerned to notice specific examples of reading as a writer in others, and to draw conclusions about how the term applies in my case. Accordingly, the study takes the form of a reflexive account of my reading of Elizabeth Bishop, and to a lesser extent, my reading of her predecessor, Gerard Manley Hopkins and her contemporary, May Swenson. A further dimension is Bishop's reading of Hopkins and Swenson, and Swenson's reading of Bishop herself. Reading as a writer is therefore examined in these various iterations. It is viewed as a discrete activity, one that is neither criticism nor scholarship exactly. It is seen to be more reliant on intuition than on intellect—more a product of taste than of rational choice. However, such clear binary distinctions are impossible to maintain. To state the obvious, critics have tastes and intuitions just as writers do, and poet-critics have found ways to resolve, and even make use of, any tensions within their dual role. What the study can hope to establish is how reading as a writer leaves its traces in subsequent creative work. My thesis maintains that the same preoccupations that shape the character of a reading life find expression in the poems and vice versa. I illustrate this phenomenon in the work of Elizabeth Bishop. I then notice how elements of it are evident in my own reading of Bishop in relationship to my own creative work. In this present chapter, I will examine Bishop's engagement with Hopkins. In particular, I will look at her interest in poems that create the effect of 'a mind thinking'. I show how this relates to the quality of 'spontaneity' that she greatly admires, and I explore the possibilities it creates for positioning the reader as an intimate—indeed as a 'best friend'—a feature that I notice in Bishop's poetry, and an ambition I pursue in some of the poems in *Pennyfields*.

II

Bishop's critical reading of Hopkins is to be found in her undergraduate essays, in letters, and in fragments from her notebooks. One aspect of what she admired most in

³ Bishop, *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box*, p. 210.

⁴ Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, p. 4.

Hopkins was the quality in his poems of capturing the mind in process. The undergraduate essay which gives the clearest direct expression of this is ‘Gerard Manley Hopkins—Notes on Timing in His Poetry’ where she compares his work to that of baroque prose writers. She quotes an essay by M.W. Croll,⁵ ‘Their purpose was to portray, not a thought, but a mind thinking’.⁶

Bishop’s paper focuses on aspects of ‘timing’, or what she also calls ‘coordination’. The first aspect of this is concerned with the variations of metre achieved in the use of sprung rhythm and the sound effects such as alliteration, repetition and internal rhyme that go to support it in Hopkins’s poetry. Along with this she considers the ‘volume of emotion’ throughout the poem, and the distribution and flow of this feature from beginning to end. Both of these aspects of timing are determined by the control and skill of the poet. The effect, she argues, is to create a sense of liveliness and abundance, where, by means of the rhythm, ‘new muscles are touched and twinged’ and, by means of the volume of emotion, there is ‘a continual flowing towards fullness’.⁷

However, Bishop explains that ‘timing’ has a further dimension in poetic practice, namely the point in time when the idea as it first appears in the mind of the poet is externalised in written form. This is seen as an inherently unstable process, which is repeatedly enacted in Hopkins’s work. His innovation for Bishop was a tendency to stop poems in mid-flight, ‘to catch and preserve the movement of an idea’. She quotes the end of Hopkins’s major poem ‘The Windhover’, which she calls ‘amazing’, for its use of sprung rhythm. ‘The Windhover’ recounts a scene freshly witnessed: ‘I caught this morning morning’s minion...’ The poem is full of the excitement of this encounter. The word ‘caught’ is used in the paradoxical sense of “caught sight of” where the thing apprehended is precisely not caught but is fleeting. The real subject of the poem is not the bird’s sudden swift movement (‘Buckle!’), but an excited thought process where this is compared to a moment of revelation. The thought is an emotional impulse as much as an intellectual one with the speaker caught off guard in line nine: ‘My heart in hiding | Stirred for a bird, | --the achieve

⁵ Morris William Croll, *Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm: Essays* (Ox Bow Press, 1966), pp. 207–237.

⁶ *PPL*, p. 666.

⁷ *PPL*, p. 664.

of, the mastery of the thing!’ The beginning of the sestet continues in this high emotional pitch:

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous. O my chevalier!

The dedicatee of the poem—‘To Christ our Lord’—comes into focus, and it is as though He, and we the reader, are then witness to another kind of mastery, the linguistic and poetic achievement of managing to ‘catch and preserve the movement of an idea’ which is developed further with the simultaneously earth-bound and fiery metaphors introduced in the final, rapturous three lines:

No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

The alliteration and internal rhyme, the rapid-fire rhythm, and the exclamation all contribute to the sense of urgency. It is the combined presence of all these features of timing that puts Bishop in mind of the baroque effect, summed up by Croll as being to preserve ‘the ardour of [an idea’s] conception in the mind’; ‘the moment in which truth is still *imagined*’.⁸

Other supporting sound effects for his use of ‘sprung rhythm’ in Bishop’s analysis include Hopkins’s ‘odd and often irritating rhyme[s...which] usually ‘come right’ on being read aloud’.⁹ The examples she gives are from ‘That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection’ and ‘The Loss of the Eurydice’ respectively. The first reads:

I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond.

⁸ *PPL*, p. 666.

⁹ *PPL*, p. 667.

The second example comes in the middle of the long narrative poem on the loss of a vessel and many lives with it:

.....He
Came equipped, deadly-electric,

A beetling baldbright cloud thorough England
Riding: there did storms not mingle? And
Hailropes hustle and grind their
Heavengravel? Wolfsnow, worlds of it, wind there?

The effect of these ‘odd’ rhymes (“am and...diamond”, “England...mingle and”) for Bishop in Hopkins is to give the sense of ‘unpremeditated, unrevised emotion’. Some of these effects were later a feature in Bishop’s own poetry. Bonnie Costello has recently summarised this in her chapter on ‘Bishop and the Poetic Tradition’,¹⁰ which has a section entitled ‘Best Friends’ where she briefly traces the influence of Herbert, Hopkins and Baudelaire. She makes use of Bishop’s undergraduate essay on Hopkins and sees various Bishop poems as being influenced directly by the creative strategies he adopts. For example Costello draws attention to the ‘off-kilter rhyme for humorous effect’ as in ‘“last, or”/ “master”’ in ‘One Art’; ‘alliteration, hyphenation, and sprung rhythm’ in ‘Song for a Rainy Season’; and ‘many of the effects and images of “The Windhover”’ in Bishop’s last poem, ‘Sonnet’. These are fascinating comparisons, after which Costello concludes that ‘Bishop’s effects are less “baroque” than Hopkins’s most of the time, but the memory of his dynamic intensity is everywhere in her work’.¹¹

Where Costello emphasises ‘dynamic intensity’ I would like to stay with the idea of Bishop’s discovery of the mind in process and to notice how this, and some of the specific techniques used to support it, plays a part in her love lyric, ‘The Shampoo’. There is one particular poem by Hopkins’s which we might see as being in dialogue with ‘The Shampoo’, his sonnet written in 1879, ‘Andromeda’. Bishop admired ‘Andromeda’ enough to use the first line as an epigraph to her undergraduate essay

¹⁰ Bonnie Costello, ‘Bishop and the Poetic Tradition’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. by Angus J. Cleghorn and Jonathan Ellis, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 79-94.

¹¹ Costello, ‘Bishop and the Poetic Tradition’, p. 89.

‘Time’s Andromedas’. There is something of the techniques in it she most admired, although it has none of the sophisticated rhythmic patterning of the poems for which Hopkins is usually best known such as ‘That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire’, and ‘The Windhover’. Furthermore ‘Andromeda’ is not normally regarded as a ‘major’ poem by Hopkins. However, that it was chosen by Bishop links back to the idea of the importance of having ‘favourites’ as a crucial part of establishing a personal poetics. My thesis is that subsequent to the early critical essays, Bishop used creative work to engage critically with poets that mattered to her.¹² Thus in the same year that ‘The Shampoo’ was published in *New Republic*, Bishop wrote to Robert Lowell:

I am trying to do a complicated poem about Hopkins and E. Dickinson, after reading that new edition [of Dickinson’s poems ed. Thomas H Johnson] . I am aiming as high as your Ford Madox Ford one, but have my doubts...¹³

That I, in turn, have chosen to put ‘The Shampoo’ and ‘Andromeda’ together says something about my own habits of reading as a writer.

III

‘Andromeda’ shares much of the imagery, the mis-en-scene and form of ‘The Shampoo’, and they both conjure up a moment which takes place beyond the limit of the poem’s own time district, if only by a second. Hopkins’s poem reads as follows:

Now Time’s Andromeda on this rock rude,
With not her either beauty’s equal or
Her injury’s, looks off by both horns of shore.
Her flower, her piece of being, doomed dragon’s food.
Time past she has been attempted and pursued
By many blows and banes; but now hears roar
A wilder beast from West than all were, more
Rife in her wrongs, more lawless, and more lewd.

¹² For further discussion see Alfred Corn, ‘Elizabeth Bishop, Critic’, *The Kenyon Review*, 31 (2009), 207–13.

¹³ Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell, *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell* (London: Faber, 2008), p. 173.

Her Perseus linger and leave her to her extremes?—
Pillow air he treads a time and hangs
His thoughts on her, forsaken that she seems,
All while her patience, morselled into pangs,
Mounts: then to alight disarming, no one dreams,
With Gorgon's gear and barebill, thongs and fangs.¹⁴

The poem foregrounds the temporal, while focussing on the urgency of being in peril in the present moment. The compacted energy of the lines creates a sense of action, albeit suspended. The drama of Andromeda being stranded on the 'rock rude'—with catastrophe beckoning and no help in sight—also serves to heighten the reader's sense of embodiment and individual destiny. This atmosphere of heightened drama is developed further by the use of other forms of thinking aloud including pauses, parenthetical remarks, and exclamations. These devices are used throughout Hopkins's work to place the reader in a relationship of dialogue and engagement. In addition, in 'equal or...horns of shore' we see another example of the one of those odd rhymes which, 'usually "come right" on being read aloud', with even clearer echoes of 'last, or....master' in 'One Art'. We also notice the rhetorical question, with inverted syntax. This has a not dissimilar cadence to 'the shooting stars in your black hair | in bright formation | are flocking where | so straight, so soon?' in 'The Shampoo'. The address in Hopkins's question is to the reader, 'Her Perseus linger and leave her to her extremes?—' as if to say, with a note of incredulity, 'Do you honestly think that would happen?' followed by a dash indicating a pause. The effect is to heighten the suspense. A dramatic tension is set up between Andromeda desperately clinging on to the rock hoping against hope for divine intervention, and Perseus who is not yet taking action. Instead he—

...hangs
His thoughts on her, forsaken that she seems,
All while her patience, morselled into pangs,
Mounts

¹⁴ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Penguin Poets, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 45.

Interestingly, what Perseus is actually doing during the hiatus is *thinking*.

In 'Andromeda', Hopkins makes extensive use of questions, here with the effect of drawing the reader in, and creating a sense of immediacy. A similar effect is found in the question in the sonnet 'Spring', with its dramatic volta in line nine—'What is all this juice and all this joy?'¹⁵ Immediately we feel involved in the excitement of a shared moment of wonder. The first line of 'Spring'— 'Nothing is so beautiful as Spring—' is quoted by Bishop as the epigraph to 'A Cold Spring', the first poem in her volume of the same name published in 1955. 'A Cold Spring' has some of the Hopkins-inspired features if we think of it as concerned with a representation of experience of time, in its slow unravelling description of spring into summer.¹⁶ The use of parenthesis and exclamation marks are further techniques in Hopkins that create a sense of intimacy, spontaneity and excitement. In 'Pied Beauty', we could argue that the question in parenthesis is the key to the poem, which glorifies God for making a world of infinite variety:

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
 With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty if past change:
 Praise him.¹⁷

The parenthesis makes the remark a form of aside and creates a more intimate level of dialogue and engagement with the reader. The exclamation marks in Hopkins similarly often make a similar personal appeal to the reader. We can see this from the ecstatic 'O my chevalier!' in 'The Windhover', to the impassioned plea in 'Binsey Poplars' 'O if we but knew what we do | When we delve or hew-- | Hack and rack the growing green!' What each of these strategies delivers is a sense of 'a mind thinking'.

Why is this idea of 'a mind thinking' important? What is it doing? How does it fit into Bishop's aesthetic ideal? Of the three admirable qualities mentioned by

¹⁵ Hopkins, *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, p.28.

¹⁶ *PPL*, p. 43.

¹⁷ Hopkins, *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, p.30.

Elizabeth Bishop—mystery, spontaneity, accuracy—it links most obviously to spontaneity. But why was this valued so highly? To begin to answer this, I will look at how ‘The Shampoo’ stands in relation to these concerns.

The contrast in tone between ‘The Shampoo’ and ‘Andromeda’ couldn’t be greater, but the two poems become perfectly complementary if we think of Bishop wanting to correspond in her poem with one of her ‘best friends’ and to repay something of what she learned from him. ‘The Shampoo’ is similarly an evocation of time’s andromedas, the discrete districts of time which constantly disturb and delight us. Her poem dramatises how other temporal and spatial dimensions provide a backdrop for our own everyday decisions. By this means it embodies our experience of the eternal as it makes itself felt in love.

We have to read the poem to the end to understand that the title refers to an event which has not yet taken place. The eponymous act is conjured up by the final two lines, but it only ever happens in the reader’s imagination—off stage as it were, after the poem is over.¹⁸ The poem therein has the characteristic she identified in Hopkins of having been stopped in ‘mid-flight’. The effect of this suspension is to give the poem a never-ending quality. It is as if the moment of intimacy will endure forever. The intimacy of touch, and the immediacy of the speech act which brings the reader in at the close of the poem, is in contrast to the large scales of time at the start.

The structure of ‘The Shampoo’ is sonnet-like, with the first stanza setting up a proposition, the second one developing it, followed by a turn in the form of a question, and a concluding couplet. The first line contains an oxymoron, the ‘still explosions’ of the lichens on the rocks which vividly captures the visual appearance of lichen. At the same time, a tension is immediately set up between stasis and movement, between peaceful contemplation, on the one hand, and a sudden angry outburst on the other. There is also a contrast between human time as contained within the memory and the history of time on a universal scale as suggested by the growth of the lichens having arranged ‘to meet the rings around the moon’:

¹⁸ For a further discussion of this feature of the poem, see Peter Robinson, ‘Pretended Acts: “The Shampoo”’ in *Elizabeth Bishop—Poet of the Periphery* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: University of Newcastle with Bloodaxe, 2002), pp. 103-112

The still explosions on the rocks,
the lichens, grow
by spreading, gray, concentric shocks.
They have arranged
to meet the rings around the moon, although
within our memories they have not changed.¹⁹

The stanza's final line—'within our memories they have not changed'—introduces a hesitation, an ambiguity: 'our' could indicate not only "mine and yours", or even "all of ours" but possibly "everyone's who has ever lived". The word holds the balance between the personal and natural dimensions of time, especially in the way it recalls its homophone "hour", emphasising how the human condition is inevitably time-bound. Although the first stanza ends with a full stop, the second stanza immediately picks up the sense and continues along the same lines. It travels from the impossibly large time scales involved in the creation of the universe and when Time itself began down to the pinpoint of the moment when a friend has been 'precipitate'. Something has happened too soon, in a hurry, or without due consideration:

And since the heavens will attend
as long on us
you've been, dear friend,
precipitate and pragmatical;
and look what happens. For Time is
nothing if not amenable.

The planetary space and potentially lengthy expanse of time narrow down to the intimacy of 'dear friend'. We can also begin to see how many of the poem's images cluster around the idea of the temporal: 'memories', 'changed', 'since', 'as long', 'precipitate', 'happens', 'Time', 'soon'. The questions behind the poem may be heard as fundamentally existential ones such as, What are we doing here? How much can we change? How long will we live? What is important about the time we have left?

¹⁹ *PPL*, p. 66.

In fact, however, the only question which does appear in the poem is paradoxically both more and less mysterious than any of these. The last stanza reads:

The shooting stars in your black hair
in bright formation
are flocking where,
so straight, so soon?
—Come, let me wash it in this big tin basin,
battered and shiny like the moon.

The subject matter of the poem is concerned with unpremeditated emotion, although the tone is itself calm and reflective. In its refusal of excitement it becomes exciting in another way. It is the friend who has acted precipitately and the speaker who is asserting that time and care will heal the situation: 'For Time is | nothing if not amenable'. That the care takes the form of an intimate encounter, or an offer of such, suggests a complex array of feelings including forgiveness and attraction, and the sort of intensity of emotion involved in a re-union that might follow an argument between a loving couple.

The etymology of the word 'shampoo' is important here: its roots in a Hindi word meaning 'press' or 'knead' lead to the primary definition of a shampoo as a massage. This heightens the eroticism of the poem and produces the idea that the 'dear friend' is in fact a lover. The metrical pulse, set across a variety of short and longer lines, also creates a sense of passion being expressed and then reined in. Where the poem had begun from a quite distant authorial position with a tone of voice appropriate to objective scientific observation that seemed to operate on a grand scale, the concluding speech act brings the reader in close. In 'The Shampoo', after beginning with what seems like an objective observation of lichen, the poem's fanciful reference to the 'rings around the moon' and the allusion to 'our memories' begins a gradual move inwards until we arrive at:

you've been, dear friend,
precipitate and pragmatical;
and look what happens.

The rhetorical question ‘The shooting stars in your black hair | [...] | are flocking where, | so straight, so soon?’ has the quality of a thought happening in the moment, as if it had just occurred to the speaker. As noted above, we can hear just such the same cadence in the inverted syntax in ‘Andromeda’: ‘Her Perseus linger and leave her to her extremes?—’ The question in ‘The Shampoo’ is addressed to the ‘dear friend’, but the reader is not excluded, rather is provided with a different kind of intimacy by finding themselves also to be the addressee, caught in a moment of profound reconciliation and tenderness.

IV

Bishop’s college paper ‘Gerard Manley Hopkins—Notes on timing’ makes use of several metaphors to describe rhythm and the moment of transference from the poet’s mind to the paper:

(This sounds involved, but can be made quite clear, I think, by picturing for a minute a crew of men rowing a shell, and considering the enormous number of individual motions going to each stroke, to each man, and the whole shell). The whole series together sets up a rhythm, which in turn enables the series to occur over and over again—possibly with variations once it is established.

Just so in poetry: the syllables, the words, in their actual duration and their duration according to sense value, set up among themselves a rhythm, which continues to flow over them.²⁰

The metaphor of rowers in a skull captures something of what she wants to say about rhythm, but to describe the usefulness of ‘outriders’ she adds the metaphor of acrobats tumbling through the air and being caught by the ankle at the last minute. To describe the coordination involved in placing thoughts on paper the metaphor of shooting ducks in a gallery is suggested, but this is soon replaced by another in which both the marksman and the target are in motion: ‘I have heard that dropping shells from an aeroplane onto a speeding battleship below, in an uncertain sea, demands the most

²⁰ *PPL*, p. 660

perfect and delicate sense of timing imaginable.’²¹ The style of Bishop’s early critical writing shares the characteristic of ‘spontaneity’ so valued in her poetry. It is lively, provisional, and always a work in progress.

The self-correction that later becomes such a feature of Bishop’s poems makes an appearance here as a highly relevant example of working through an idea and thinking in the moment. In short, we see in her early criticism examples of ‘a mind thinking’. In the same way, in her poetry, it is as if we are watching her poem being written. One example would be in Bishop’s best-known poem, ‘One Art’, with its final line containing an exhortation to the poet in parenthesis, ‘(Write it!)’. It is interesting to compare the cadence of this ending with the end of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s ‘God’s Grandeur’. ‘One Art’ concludes:

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan’t have lied. It’s evident
the art of losing’s not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

And Hopkins’s last three lines are:

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.²²

The ‘ah!’ in ‘God’s Grandeur’ is effectively in parenthesis— the reader has to stop to give it room for breath before the final two words. The ‘ah!’ is also an echo of the ‘Oh’ two lines above. The effect is of wonder and awe, a halting, barely contained excitement. The pause indicated by the dash after ‘springs’ also summons up ‘a mind thinking’. It is as if there is no distance between the thought and the moment it is set to paper. It is a technique employed again in the final line of ‘Carrion Comfort’ with

²¹ *PPL*, p. 665.

²² Hopkins, *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, p. 27.

an even closer resemblance to 'One Art'.²³ Bishop uses many comparable techniques. In these four lines alone there is the pause indicated by the dash before '—Even losing you'; two parenthesis, and the exclamation. In the phrase '(Write it!)' she is providing a glimpse into the emotional and technical effort involved in composition, as she encourages herself to reach for the poem's last word.

Bishop's statements about poetics are elusive. As Victoria Harrison says, 'When we go in search of a *modus operandi* or a system of beliefs about writing, we find instead pithy fragments, scattered over years and across a range of audiences. Bishop's greatest consistency was her refusal of a systematic means for understanding poetry'.²⁴ The most sustained critical writing is contained in her undergraduate essays. To justify placing so much weight on these works it is relevant to apply her own concept of the 'perfection of generalities'.²⁵ In 'Dimensions for a Novel', written when she was twenty-three years old, 'perfection of generalities' is used to describe the level of consciousness which a young person acquires before adolescence, amounting to an essential awareness of themselves and others. As the term suggests, this perfection is achieved generally, and is only later improved on and developed in relation to specific areas of understanding. This appreciation of human development itself is dramatised in various poems and stories. We might point to the portrayal of the young narrator of 'In the Village' and 'Gwendolyn' in particular, or that of the narrator of 'In the Waiting Room'. Here, the speaker is caught in the moment of a consciousness dawning:

I said to myself: three days
and you'll be seven years old.
I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world
into cold, blue-black space.
But I felt: you are an I,
you are an *Elizabeth*,

²³ 'That night, that year | Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God.' Hopkins, *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, p. 27

²⁴ Victoria Harrison, *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 28.

²⁵ *PPL*, p. 680.

you are one of *them*.²⁶

Bishop argues in 'Dimensions for a Novel' that all creatures and artistic forms have a set of dimensions from within which they can be themselves. A person—or an elephant or a lobster, say—is not going to grow beyond a certain size, and such defining growth happens early in life. This analogy is provided to illustrate how far the parameters of a literary form might possibly be stretched. Bishop wants to propose a change to the form of the novel, which might allow for a truer representation of our experience of time. 'Dimensions for a Novel' is a manifesto whose promises are delivered throughout her career in the poems.

From this perspective, the youthful essays can be seen to contain the fundamental principles of her art in embryo, which were to grow into fullness later within the poems themselves. I will look at this more closely in Chapter Five. The bass notes that accompany Bishop's concern with literary form are the nature of literary influence and tradition, and the felt experience of time. The first is alluded to by way of Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', the ideas of which Bishop applies to her own argument for her own purposes. Thus, Bishop concludes the discussion of literary achievement in 'Dimensions for a Novel' with an image which supports Eliot's conviction that later works of art may influence earlier ones as well as the other way around:

We live in great whispering galleries, constantly vibrating and humming, or we walk through salons with mirrors where the reflections between the narrow walls are limitless, and each present moment reaches immediately and directly the past moments, changing them both.²⁷

However, Bishop's ideas about the temporal add to Eliot's by seeing chronology in human experience and in literary tradition as far from straightforward. By breaking up and highlighting our notions of time, she felt that literature could remind us how often we are at odds with what has happened, what is going to happen, or may be happening in the present moment:

²⁶ *PPL*, p. 150.

²⁷ *PPL*, pp. 674–5.

Is it possible that there may be a sort of experience-time, or the time pattern in which realities reach us, quite different from the hour after hour, day after day kind?...Why should the days behind me retreat systematically—Friday, Thursday, Wednesday, Tuesday—and not any other way? why not Wednesday, Friday, Tuesday, if they seem that way to me?²⁸

To explore these ideas is not just to be inventive in literary terms, but also to try to say something truthful about human experience. In psychoanalysis, I would suggest, there is a similar understanding of different districts of time existing in their own relation to each other, rather than merely chronologically. Roland Barthes explores this in his book *A Lover's Discourse*, especially in the passage on 'Anxiety' where he refers to Winnicott:

The psychotic lives in the terror of breakdown (against which the various psychoses are merely defences). But [quoting Winnicott] 'the clinical fear of breakdown is the fear of a breakdown which has already been experienced (primitive agony)... and there are moments when a patient needs to be told that the breakdown, fear of which is wrecking his life, has already occurred.' Similarly, it seems, for the lover's anxiety: it is the fear of a mourning which has already occurred, at the very origin of love, from the moment when I was first 'ravished'. Someone would have been able to tell me: "Don't be anxious any more – you've already lost him/her."²⁹

The novel—and literature in general—presents for the young Bishop a challenge to use form and technique to capture this experience of time. While still at Vassar, Bishop is probing the theory of literature and the notion of time in particular, wondering how to give 'a clearer sense of things and people.'³⁰ Her reading of Hopkins introduced some of the technical means to bring this question into poetry.

²⁸ *PPL*, p. 659.

²⁹ Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), pp. 29–30.

³⁰ *PPL*, p. 680.

Chapter Three – Elizabeth Bishop reads May Swenson

Reading May Swenson's work and acting as her mentor provided an opportunity for Elizabeth Bishop to articulate her own poetics in an exchange which became fruitful on both sides. Kirstin Hotelling Zona has shown how the correspondence with Swenson mirrors that between Bishop and Marianne Moore.¹ In this regard an argument between Bishop and Swenson about being prudish for example, and whether certain words should be avoided as being vulgar, is a replay of an earlier exchange between Bishop and Moore.² However, this time Bishop takes the place of Moore as the one who is the judge of good taste, and Swenson is the one to question her judgement on occasion. As Zona shows, the value for Swenson in understanding Bishop's aesthetic lay in learning how to make use of restraint to achieve clarity in poems that allow 'no self-indulgence'.³ The common ground they shared was to oppose the prevailing mode: as we have seen, Swenson declared in an interview in 1979, 'neither of us writes confessional poetry.'⁴ I will look further at this in the next chapter and see how Bishop found in Swenson one of her most astute readers, one who could appreciate the work in much more than biographical terms. But how did Bishop read Swenson, and how does such a reading illuminate Bishop's own poetic practice? That will be the focus of the current chapter.

Loren MacIver was a college friend and artist who designed the book jackets to the first editions of *North & South* and other Bishop collections. On the occasion of first meeting May Swenson, at Yaddo in Upstate New York in 1950, Bishop wrote to MacIver,

[a] long "literary talk with a girl here named May Swenson who writes quite extraordinary poetry—some in *Tiger's Eye*, I think. She's awfully cute, lives on Perry St. too, and maybe at Christmas time if I get to N.Y. as I hope I could bring her to call on you.⁵

¹ Kristin Hotelling Zona, 'May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop' in P. Crumbley and P. M Gantt, *Body My House: May Swenson's Work and Life* (Utah State University Press, 2006), pp. 55–80.

² For example see David Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell* (London: Hogarth Press, 1989), p. 80–81 for a discussion of Moore's objection to 'water-closet' in 'Roosters' and Bishop's defence of its use.

³ Zona, 'May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop', p. 56.

⁴ *MWW*, p. 122.

⁵ Bishop, *One Art: Letters Selected & Edited by Robert Giroux*, p. 210.

From this beginning the two poets retained a friendship for over twenty-five years until Bishop's death in 1979. When Bishop is writing to Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell about Swenson, she is more guarded in her assessment at first. To Marianne Moore, Bishop judged that on first encounter Swenson's work was 'not bad'; years later writing to their mutual friend Robert Lowell, Bishop admits to liking Swenson 'in spots'.⁶ In their early correspondence Swenson admits to being untrained, comparing herself to a musician who composes by ear without being able to read music.⁷ By her own admission, any reliance on a formal tradition appears to be missing, such as when Swenson remarks to Bishop that she does not know the name for a sestina. Such accounts would appear to support a sharp distinction between them: as Bishop is more naturally identified with the mind thinking, and Swenson with an unconscious, embodied aesthetic, a division might begin to suggest itself between thought and conscious form, on the one hand, and feeling and absence of conscious form on the other. Although that contrast between thinking and feeling forms the backdrop to many of their critical exchanges, it would be mistaken to see Bishop as a cold cerebral poet and Swenson as a warm, physical one. If her attachment to Hopkins relates to the quality of 'Spontaneity', the friendship with Swenson most clearly resonates with Bishop's admiration for 'Accuracy'. This is not just about matters of prosody but also of truth. This, too, perhaps unsurprisingly turns out to be a reprise of some of the themes in the correspondence between Bishop and Marianne Moore, touching on matters of form and diction, ethics and fidelity, and the relationship between life and art.

The tensions, rivalry and personal attachment between Bishop and Swenson forms a backdrop to their critical exchanges. Bishop admired Swenson from the start both as a person and as a writer, confessing to her when they first met, that reading Swenson's poetry made her 'green with jealousy'.⁸ It is not clear from their correspondence (nor from correspondence with Robert Lowell) what it was that she so envied. It is notable that a comparable feeling is expressed in relation to Lowell, when in a letter of December 1957 she confesses to being 'green with envy of your

⁶ *PPL*, p. 206; 365.

⁷ *MWW*, p. 218.

⁸ Gary Fountain and Peter Brazeau, *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop : An Oral Biography* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), p. 121.

kind of assurance'.⁹ It is possible that it was Swenson's assurance, with its foundation not so much in public stature but rather in a personal self-confidence, that made Bishop jealous on the occasion of their first meeting. Throughout their careers Bishop used her status to help promote Swenson—providing jacket copy for her publications and recommending her for prizes and awards.¹⁰ There was also a genuine affection in their poetic friendship: Bishop felt pleased to see Swenson receive recognition.¹¹ Their correspondence forms part of the negotiation of the terms of their poetics, discussed between them in general terms and on the basis of specific comments about individual poems. Their common interest in engaging the reader in an intimate dialogue allows me to build on the foundations of Chapter Two and to further articulate my own poetics in Chapter Six by connecting their shared terms of reference to some of the poems in *Pennyfields*.

I

Bishop's tendency when offering Swenson a critical response was to stress the value of more formal constraints. For example, Bishop warned Swenson against the lack of punctuation in her work. This produced a confident riposte: 'The non-punctuation, I'm afraid, I'm committed to, in spite of everything against it.' In the same letter of September 1953, Swenson goes on with equal certainty to defend her approach: 'You say no punctuation limits one's range, but I've found that frequently an effect can be gotten from the absence of punctuation itself, that adds to the particular quality of a poem.' In her view, such an effect is due to the writer's keener concern to find the right word, and the reader's heightened quality of attention: 'Doesn't it lure [the reader]', she wonders, 'deeper into it—force him to follow more subtle clues to understanding?'¹² However, Bishop admired early poems that had no punctuation such as the 'The Tide at Long Point', while, as Swenson expanded her technique, she came to allow *more* punctuation until eventually she used it in all her work. She

⁹ Bishop, *One Art: Letters Selected & Edited by Robert Giroux*, p. 351.

¹⁰ For example Bishop provided blurbs for *A Cage of Spines* and *To Mix with Time*, and was instrumental in granting Swenson's Fellowship of the Academy of American Poets in 1979. See *MWW* p. 255

¹¹ When Anthony Hecht's glowing piece appeared in the *New York Review of Books* in 1963 Bishop remarked that she thought it was well-earned. Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell, *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell* (London: Faber, 2008), p. 466.

¹² *MWW*, p. 200.

herself found this reversal surprising as she makes clear in an interview in 1977 when she admits with inimitable charm: ‘I am discovering there is a reason why punctuation was invented. And it can be clarifying, and there’s no real reason for leaving it out.’¹³

This trajectory towards a more traditional approach is one that Swenson took in other respects too. In a letter to Bishop in October 1955, Swenson is quite open about not recognising the form of ‘Sestina’—Bishop’s poem originally titled ‘Early Sorrow’. She asks, ‘What do you call it when a set of the same words are used to end the lines in each stanza? I never studied prosody.’¹⁴ Bishop responds by offering to send a copy of the *Complete Rhyming Dictionary and Handbook of Poetry* as a Christmas present which, judging by her reply, Swenson appears to be drawn to with only a hint of scepticism: ‘When I get hold of it perhaps I’ll learn what a PANTOUM is, which sounds very exciting.’¹⁵ Swenson’s witty remark may be seen in the context of the original title of her poem ‘Mortal Surge’ that was first named after its opening lines, “We are Eager | We Pant”. By the time the *Rhyming Dictionary* arrives from Brazil, she can immediately see how useful she is going to find the resource, recognising that her fear of using it previously—on the grounds that it would be too ‘calculating...’—was part of an attitude that was ‘idiotic’.¹⁶ Towards the end of the same letter Swenson is full of self-criticism:

...it’s as if I’ve been composing by ear, never troubled to learn to read notes. One can only go a limited distance that way and it’s forgivable only in a youngster. I only hope to work to become a poet; so far it has been play and exercise, and it’s past time that sort of thing should be supplanted. Not to be more *serious* but to be more sure of what one is doing, and why. This little excoriation has done me good—to put it down instead of just hazily feeling it—so don’t feel you must be nice and contradict it.¹⁷

¹³ *MWW*, p. 109.

¹⁴ *MWW*, p. 211.

¹⁵ *MWW*, p. 213.

¹⁶ *MWW*, p. 216.

¹⁷ *MWW*, p. 218.

Two years later, Swenson was delighted by the ‘stunning’¹⁸ jacket copy that Bishop provided for *A Cage of Spines*. This generous appreciation focuses on the emotional brio of Swenson’s poems, as Bishop simply states:

Miss Swenson looks, and sees, and rejoices in what she sees. Her poems are varied, energetic and full of a directness and optimism that are unusual in these days of formulated despair and/or careful stylishness.¹⁹

At the end of the letter of May 1958 where Swenson shows her gratitude for this, she also pleads with Bishop to send another letter of criticism which Bishop has alluded to: ‘I very much *need* to be criticized. No one takes the trouble to do it, and I confer only with myself about my work—unhealthy and misleading.’²⁰ The result of this is a four-page letter of June 1958 that Bishop decides to send after some hesitation, fearing that it would be too late to make any changes to *A Cage of Spines*, and that if Swenson took the comments too seriously they would be upsetting. Bishop also remarks that she thinks Swenson does not need direction: ‘I do think you are old enough, developed enough, to know what you’re trying to do.’ However, Bishop finally accepts her friend’s invitation, believing that helpful criticism is hard to come by, and ‘although one can’t get much help about the big things I think help with little things is always welcome—like mis-use of words, over-use of some words, echoes of other people, just plain lack of grammatical clarity, or bad meter.’²¹ Bishop admits to her own blind spots and personal preferences: ‘What I think really doesn’t matter much, you know—and I may well be wrong, or prejudiced.’ She distances herself from critics proper, and yet—out of friendship—wants to anticipate any concerns that they may be expected to voice. She identifies with the plight of the poet, saying that personally she always needs her partner Lota de Macedo Soares to read her work through for things that do not make sense or are not clear. Bishop also carefully prefaces her comments with a statement of broad appreciation: she admires Swenson for being ‘experimental and also prolific’ and, although she fears the book of poems

¹⁸ *MWW*, p. 224.

¹⁹ *PPL*, p. 733.

²⁰ *MWW*, p. 224.

²¹ ‘May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop Correspondence’, p. 1, 04 June 1958.

as it stands may be too long and ‘somewhat uneven’, she judges that ‘the manuscript has within it an extremely good book’.²²

Bishop’s more negative comments begin with an objection to Swenson’s visual poetics, pointing in particular to ‘The Legend of To Rise’ and ‘R.F. at Bread Loaf His Hand Against a Tree’, saying ‘You know already that I don’t care for those forms that look as though the printer had dropped them on the floor’.²³ Bishop is not convinced by what she calls these ‘eccentricities of form’, suspecting that they are not ‘forced on the poem from within’.²⁴ Her main disagreement with Swenson’s stylistic choices is that they are too many and too various: ‘One gets the impression that just for fun you’re trying out trick after trick—which is the thing to do, too—but one finally has to settle down with one’s own style.’²⁵ It is clear now that Swenson’s visual poetics *was* part of her own style, albeit one that Bishop did not admire at first. Swenson was open about the way that the typographical arrangements were made after the poem had been written and that the shape of the poem was there to underline the linguistic content.²⁶ There are many striking examples and my personal favourite is ‘How Everything Happens (Based on a Study of the Wave)’.²⁷ The typographical element makes it awkward to quote effectively but the opening stanza appears:

happen.
to
up
stacking
is
something
When nothing is happening

²² ‘May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop Correspondence’, p.1, 04 June 1958.

²³ ‘May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop Correspondence’, p.1 04 June 1958

²⁴ ‘May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop Correspondence’, p. 2. 04 June 1958

²⁵ ‘May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop Correspondence’, p. 2. 04 June 1958

²⁶ For a discussion of these poems in relation to Swenson’s poetics see Michael Spooner, ‘How Everything Happens: Notes on May Swenson’s Theory of Writing’, in *Body My House: May Swenson’s Work and Life*, ed. by Paul Crumbley and Patricia M. Gantt, (Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2006), pp. 157–80.

²⁷ May Swenson, *New & Selected Things Taking Place* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978), p. 119.

This poem is published in the large format volume *Things Taking Place*. It effectively captures in both its linguistic and visual characteristics Swenson's sense of poetry being always in process—things that are 'taking place' in the very moment we encounter them on the page. When, over a decade after their correspondence on the matter, *Iconographs* was published in 1970 bringing all Swenson's shape-poems together in one volume, Bishop went on to praise it highly.²⁸ As Swenson explained in an interview in 1977, they were a particular strand of her inventiveness as a poet at the time. Although she was not dissuaded from the practice by Bishop's remarks, they did cause her to think more seriously about the visual arrangements of lines as a conceit which she considered to be 'part of my compulsive eye-mindedness'.²⁹

The other main point of contention in Bishop's letter is the unevenness of tone caused by the use of words that she considered unattractive or even 'indecent' in poems that were 'otherwise normally polite'.³⁰ One such poem is 'A Lake Scene',³¹ in which she objects to particular words such as 'torso', 'pelvis', 'armpit' and 'loins' on the grounds that they are obtrusive and only serve to mar the poem. As for the unexpected use of such words in expressions such as 'In thighs of trees', Bishop feels that it is 'somehow wrong'.³² To Swenson's mind however, it is not clear at all that 'buttock' is an uglier word than, say, *thumb*. Or that *groin* is an ugly word, or image either.³³ She defends her use of anatomical words on the grounds that they are not there to startle, but rather as a consequence of her 'taken-for-granted belief' that,

...as human animals, we have *nothing but* our sensual equipment, through which all impressions and expressions flow: thought and philosophy, reason and the spiritual, all included. It's not a *view* really—an indelible *feeling*.³⁴

Thus, in 'A Lake Scene', the poem's diction mingles the appreciation of the human body with an inspection of the line of the hills from the point of view of a deer. Due to an absence of revelation, Swenson maintains the tension:

²⁸ Bishop, *One Art: Letters Selected & Edited by Robert Giroux*, p. 535.

²⁹ *MWW*, p. 226.

³⁰ 'May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop Correspondence', p. 3, 04 June 1958.

³¹ *MWW*, p. 71.

³² 'May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop Correspondence', p. 3, 04 June 1958.

³³ *MWW*, p. 227.

³⁴ *MWW*, p. 227.

...nothing tears
the transparent skin that water
and sky and, between them,
the undulant horizon wears.³⁵

There is a sense of wonder which is not far from that of Bishop in ‘At the Fishhouses’ with its apprehension of what is ‘Cold dark deep and absolutely clear, | element bearable to no mortal’³⁶ —lines that Swenson said had ‘carved a groove in my mind’.³⁷ However different her music, Swenson is also spying deep truths about how, for her, knowledge is made, as her deer’s eye ‘goes there, to the source | of a first secret’³⁸ showing a shared interest in the problem of how to move beyond observation to something more internal and ultimately more metaphysical.

Swenson is in a despondent mood as she ends the letter of 24 June 1958 in response to her friend’s detailed comments:

What I expect is that the book will get scant attention one way or another from *critics*. I don’t know if it’s in me to write *important* poetry. I don’t know if my life will turn out to have been important, except to myself. (Significant poetry comes out of a significant life.).³⁹

Bishop wrote in her jacket copy for *To Mix with Time* that Swenson’s poetry ‘has always reminded me a little of John Clare’. She goes on:

...a great part of one’s pleasure in her work is *her* pleasure; she has directness, affection, and a rare and reassuring ungrudgingness. When she turns her John Clare-like gaze on New York City she reacts just as ungrudgingly.⁴⁰

³⁵ May Swenson, *To Mix with Time New and Selected Poems* (New York: Scribner, 1963).

³⁶ *PPL*, p. 50.

³⁷ *MWW*, p. 208.

³⁸ Swenson, *To Mix with Time New and Selected Poems*, p. 248.

³⁹ *MWW*, p. 228.

⁴⁰ *PPL*, p. 734.

Bishop had tested this comparison on Swenson, and it was tentatively accepted: ‘If I am accused of being like him in my work I’d be pleased. I think my *attitude* is something like his...’⁴¹ These snippets of criticism in relation to John Clare are intriguing; Bishop does not spell out the terms of the comparison precisely but it has to do with directness, with immediacy, with a sense of spontaneity. Nevertheless, when Swenson accedes to the comparison she admits to only knowing the half-dozen of Clare’s works that appear in her anthology of English poets, for which she does not give a title. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, first published in 1962 the year of Swenson’s letter, carries ten Clare poems including ‘Pastoral Poesy’, ‘Mouse’s Nest’, ‘A Vision’, ‘I Am’, ‘An Invite to Eternity’ and ‘Clock a Clay’.⁴² In ‘Mouse’s Nest’ the casual investigation of nature leads to revelation, the poem beginning simply, ‘I found a ball of grass among the hay | And propped it as I passed and went away’. Swenson has some of the same charmingly grounded, and marginal point of view, as in ‘At the Museum of Modern Art’ which finds artistic value in the sight of museum visitors in the entrance hall, with its opening lines,

At the Museum of Modern Art you can sit in the lobby
on the foam-rubber couch; you can rest and smoke,
and view whatever the revolving doors express.
You don’t have to go into to the galleries at all.⁴³

There is something in the wish to escape from the limited currency of words that both poets also share. In Clare’s ‘Pastoral Poesy’, ‘True poesy is not in words, | But images that thoughts express, | By which the simplest hearts are stirred | To elevated happiness’; for Swenson in ‘From the Office Window’ words are called into question in a description of the New York City skyline: ‘Words? Let their | mutations work | toward an escape || of objects into the nearest next | shape, motion, assembly, | temporal context’. Perhaps most striking is how Clare and Swenson’s lyric voice can aspire to sound from within the natural world in an eerie transformation. Clare’s speaker in ‘Clock a Clay’ becomes the ladybird, and in Swenson’s ‘The Exchange’, to

⁴¹ MWW, p. 238.

⁴² M.H. Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Vol. 2*, 7th edition (W. W. Norton & Co., 2003), pp. 802–811.

⁴³ May Swenson, *Collected Poems* (New York: The Library of America, 2013), p. 185

take one of many such examples, a similar disembodied voice is adopted, 'Now, my body flat, the ground | breathes. I'll be the grass.'⁴⁴

Further valuable context for Bishop's comparison between Swenson and Clare is provided in a letter from Bishop referring to two reviews when *To Mix with Time* first appeared in 1963. One is by Anthony Hecht in the *New York Review of Books*, and the other by Richard Moore in *The Nation*. Elizabeth Bishop wrote:

I think the reviews are WONDERFUL, May – you are being a huge success I can see, and a well-deserved one. And they both pick the right things to admire, for once. Richard Moore obviously loves the poems he talks about – and I think he says, but better, what I meant by comparing you to Clare.⁴⁵

Richard Moore appreciates Swenson's questioning nature, and her 'vivid vision'⁴⁶ and he admires how there are no explanations or abstractions, leaving the reader with an experience of perception that is phenomenological; we are called to make sense of things as if for the first time. Moore picks out 'Snow in New York', as Anthony Hecht had done in his review,⁴⁷ and here we can see precisely how Swenson's 'John Clare-like gaze' turns on the metropolitan landscape. Moore's review does not mention John Clare, but, taking his remarks alongside those of Hecht, it can be seen that the Clare-like features include an uncanny sense of the poem being written as if meaning were made in the present moment. For example in Clare's 'The Wren' the poem immediately launches into a complaint expressed passionately as if to a close friend: 'Why is the cuckoos melody preferred | And nightingales sick song so madly praised | In poets rhymes is there no other bird | in natures minstrelsy that hath not raised | Ones heart to extacy and mirth as well'⁴⁸ John Ashbery writes about this quality of immediacy in Clare such that the reader is constantly brought back to their own present.⁴⁹ In Swenson the same effect of immediacy and intimacy with the reader is partly achieved in 'Snow in New York' because it is a poem that explicitly

⁴⁴ Swenson, *New & Selected Things Taking Place*, p. 210.

⁴⁵ 'May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop Correspondence', p. 03 October 1963, p2.

⁴⁶ Richard Moore, "'One Knows by Seeing" -- a Review of *To Mix With Time* by May Swenson', *The Nation*, 197 (1963), 76–77.

⁴⁷ Anthony Hecht, 'Recent Poetry', *The New York Review of Books*, 1 June 1963, p. 33.

⁴⁸ John Clare, *Selected Poems and Prose of John Clare*, Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield eds. (Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 105.

⁴⁹ Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, p. 19.

engages with the subject of reading and writing. As in John Clare's work, we are in the poet's company, at her shoulder as it were: 'It snowed in New York. I walked on Fifth | Avenue and saw the orange snowplow cut the drifts | with rotary sickles'. Moving through her snowy day the solitary artist is profoundly social, later out in the café at Riker's Island, thinking about Rilke, carrying him with her in the memory, the sound and the shape of his words, the ambition of his aesthetic. It is through the memory of his work that the speaker meditates on poetry and snow all against the backdrop of the city. 'I went to Riker's to blow my nose | in a napkin and drink coffee for its steam. Two rows | of belts came and went from the kitchen, modelling scrambled | eggs, corn muffins, bleeding triangles of pie.' Then,

I thought
of Rilke, having read how he wrote

to Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis, saying: 'The idea haunts me—
it keeps on calling—I must make a poem for Nijinski
that could be, so to say, swallowed and then danced.' Printed
as on the page, in its
remembered place in the paragraph, that odd name with three dots
over the *iji*, appeared—as I squinted
through the moist window past the travelling
dishes—against the snow.⁵⁰

The poetry, as with John Clare, is not only in books but on window panes and on the snow-covered ground. Richard Moore's review does have some reservations which happen to be the ones that Bishop had tried to express. When she said to Swenson that he had put it better than she could about the quality of observation, it will not have gone unnoticed by Swenson that Moore had also criticized the typographical tricks and found that the work lacked power when there was an absence of firm metre, regular rhyme and rhetoric all at once (he points to 'Downward'⁵¹ as an example). But, in conclusion, he judges that the best poems are full of 'haunting specifics' in work that in his view is reminiscent of Elizabeth Bishop and Emily Dickinson, but

⁵⁰ Swenson, *Collected Poems*, p. 183.

⁵¹ Swenson, *Collected Poems*, p. 145.

‘with a quality found in neither’.⁵² Bishop’s instincts were right. Bishop could praise but was not able to articulate her critical assessment, or at least others such as Richard Moore were able to do so more fully. For all the replay of the debate about decorum and language that was ‘indecent’, it is Swenson’s intellectual curiosity and generosity of spirit which Bishop most admires.

III

In this final section I would like to concentrate on ‘Dear Elizabeth’, Swenson’s poem made from lines in a Bishop letter, which might be seen as the best testament to their poetic alliance. In such an exchange it is not clear at times who is reading whom. But I take it here as a complex double reflex, where Bishop is reading Swenson reading Bishop. The fact that the material originates from her own letter only serves to underline Bishop’s capacity for—and professional pride in—being impersonal.⁵³ Swenson first approaches Bishop in a letter of 25 September 1963 to request permission to use some lines from a letter she had sent from Brazil to make a poem. The ensuing correspondence can be read as a negotiation over lesbian and poetic identity as has been shown by Richard Howard’s commentary.⁵⁴ Neil Arditì has also made use of the correspondence to make sense of Swenson’s poems for and about Bishop.⁵⁵ I would like to add to these important discussions by examining the implied poetics shared by each poet, which is articulated in terms of a balance between factual accuracy and poetic truth. For example, by selecting Bishop’s description of a pair of birds, Swenson is suggesting that there is something in the image that speaks to her at a metaphorical level:

...their feathers, you tell
me, incredibly beautiful ‘alternating
lights and darks like nearly invisible
wave-marks on a sandflat at low tide,

⁵² Richard Moore, “‘One Knows by Seeing’ -- a Review of *To Mix With Time* by May Swenson”, p. 77.

⁵³ PPL, pp. 809–810.

⁵⁴ Richard Howard, ‘Elizabeth Bishop-May Swenson Correspondence’, in *The Paris Review* ed. by George Plimpton, Vol. 36, No. 131: Summer, 1994, pp. 176-185.

⁵⁵ Neil Arditì, “‘In the Bodies of Words’: The Swenson-Bishop Conversation.’, *Parnassus*, Literature Online, 26 (2002), 77.

and with a pattern so fine one must put on
reading glasses to appreciate it properly'.⁵⁶

By quoting Bishop's words back to her, evoking the trademark liminal seacoast, Swenson is showing how much Bishop's poetry is identified with the creatures she describes. When she considers these lines Bishop is preoccupied with the need for factual accuracy rather than interpretation. However, she does so in a light-hearted way, showing that she is in on the joke that something can be read into the birds with her self-deprecating comment, 'I must put on my reading glasses—not *tudo o mundo* [i.e., 'not everyone']. I'm just getting more & more far-sighted with age.'⁵⁷ Swenson, however, retained her original diction, 'one must put on', resisting the purely personal reference of the letter. By insisting on this, Swenson is making clear that the birds needed to be 'read'—suggesting that they are in some ways like Bishop's poems. There was to be a note at the beginning of the poem when it was published 'A reply to Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil' so such inter-textual resonances would clearly sound for any informed reader.

In a reply to Swenson in October 1963, Bishop gives a detailed examination of the lines in draft Swenson had written, based in part on her own letter. As with her comment on the 'reading glasses', the approach Bishop takes to revisions stems from the assumption that poetry is about something in the world—something involving matters of fact—and that pursuit of accuracy should be both passionate and social. Bishop takes pains to point out, for instance, the exact nature of the markings on the birds: 'There's no real "spot—just a "jelly bean" but maybe it's smaller: a *Boston* baked bean would be right—not a N.Y. one.' Charming, and possibly teasing her correspondent in this way, she concludes the paragraph 'I think the poem might work out rather well'.⁵⁸

In another playful letter, Bishop quotes from a book for children featuring a portrait of the bird in the first person. She explains to Swenson, 'the Bico de Lacre is speaking'

⁵⁶ Swenson, *Collected Poems*, p. 229.

⁵⁷ Howard, 'Elizabeth Bishop-May Swenson Correspondence', p. 176.

⁵⁸ Bishop, *One Art: Letters Selected & Edited by Robert Giroux*, p. 419.

and quotes extensively from the passage, ‘My voice is very nice, but weak, and I have no song’.⁵⁹ The self-portrait in the bird book effectively corrects Bishop’s description in her original letter and hence Swenson’s poem. But Swenson prefers the original over the corrected version, saying rather childishly, ‘You did say “rose-red spot” and “baked bean” not “jelly bean”—and I don’t care, I want to use your original words. Don’t care if they’re originally from Africa or Australia—I want to place them in Brazil.’ In the same letter Swenson reports having come through unscathed a question and answer session at Smith College. Her position on the podium was to maintain that a poet does not have to *know* anything—rather, ‘only teachers and students have to know’. When this is challenged by a member of the audience, Swenson teases: ‘Well, one should know the alphabet—and a little grammar doesn’t hurt, as long as you don’t get too stuck on it.’⁶⁰ By quoting this to Bishop, Swenson is in swaggering mode, showing how well she can cope with the threat of academic criticism, and she is also highlighting to her friend that other things are more important than factual accuracy.

The debate over usage or matters of fact is never disrespectful, and much is left unsaid—including the sense that Swenson and her partner Pearl Kazin, or Bishop and Lota de Macado Soares, may be the subjects of the poem about a pair of birds who have no husbands. (Is this, perhaps, one unspoken imaginative truth that is more important than factual accuracy?) Swenson consults Bishop again in a letter of June 1965 by which time a version has already been accepted for publication by Howard Moss at *The New Yorker*. When they are down to discussing publication in *The New Yorker* and the wording of a dedication, even the magazine’s notoriously strict editorial procedures cannot spoil things. The magazine was an early and consistent champion of Bishop’s poems and made a virtue of clarity at all times. It was also a bastion for correctness in American-English usage, and Bishop appreciated the precision that was required—except when she felt the fastidiousness had gone too far. For instance, she complained to friends that the editorial queries had put her off working on ‘In the Village’, which at the time she considered her best story. ‘Now I’ve re-done it a little, but will not concede another comma for clarity’s sake [...] But

⁵⁹ Howard, ‘Elizabeth Bishop-May Swenson Correspondence’, p. 177.

⁶⁰ Howard, ‘Elizabeth Bishop-May Swenson Correspondence’, p. 178.

one tires of typing even a masterpiece I find'.⁶¹ Certainly, Bishop is truly touched by Swenson's efforts in making the poem agreeable to all, ending her letter in July 1965 in a way that negotiates their different positions on accuracy affectionately: 'They are fiends for accuracy of course—but so am I, in my way—so are you in your carefulness in this—so are we all. And so goodnight...'.⁶²

This 'carefulness' shown by Swenson was conspicuously absent when Robert Lowell was to make poems out of letters Bishop wrote to him. He felt compelled to write the poems perhaps for some of the same reasons as Swenson, namely to make sense of personal feelings, to pay professional tribute but also to acknowledge their differences. However, it was not possible for Lowell to name his differences with Bishop in thoughtful, measured terms. He described Bishop's tone as 'the casual perfect' and yet, as David Kalstone says of Lowell, 'His own life was so turbulent that he never waited for it to compose definitively, never expected to make the casual perfect, kept arranging and rearranging in order to "explain" his life to himself'. As Kalstone shows, the four poems for Elizabeth Bishop, and their correspondence about it, is a betrayal of Bishop's trust. More woundingly, by his publication of her barely altered words in his own poem, ('Letter with Poems for a Letter with Poem') Lowell betrays Bishop's confidence by pursuing his confessional approach and thus, in Kalstone's words, he 'turns his own aesthetic against her'.⁶³ In contrast, 'Dear Elizabeth'— 'our bird poem'—becomes, for Bishop and Swenson, an emblem of their success in simultaneously acknowledging difference and enjoying sameness. Their differences could be expressed in terms of the order and relative weight given in a poem to thought and feeling, and the competing values of fact and truth. Their overlapping poetic dialogue, however, manages to hold these categories in counterpoint rather than splitting them apart. The terms of the shared poetics are defined by Bishop, with Swenson being co-opted into the category of those who are 'fiends for accuracy' through that diplomatic shift to 'carefulness'. Yet perhaps accuracy was not the quality that Swenson most admired in Bishop's work. It is to Swenson's appreciation of her mentor that we turn in the next chapter.

⁶¹ Joelle Biele, *Elizabeth Bishop and The New Yorker: The Complete Correspondence* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011), p. 113.

⁶² Howard, 'Elizabeth Bishop-May Swenson Correspondence', p. 183.

⁶³ Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell*, p. 239.

Chapter Four – May Swenson reads Elizabeth Bishop

When Bishop tried to improve Swenson's 'accuracy', Swenson's self-confidence and brio allowed her to argue the point, suggesting that factual truth was not the only or even the best starting point. Their honest exchange on this matter was akin to a workshop culture in which both parties were able to learn. While respecting their differences, however I may be making too many assumptions here. There is a danger that I might conflate or confuse my learning with theirs. My position more securely is that as a poet there is something for me in reading the two of them side by side. In this chapter I notice how the differences between them allowed Bishop to arrive at a formulation that poetry for her was a way of 'thinking with one's feelings'.¹ What was meant by this statement, and how valuable might it prove for my own poetics?

I

In her close reading of Richard Wilbur's 'Love Calls Us to the Things of This World', published in 1957, Swenson again shows her preference for an intuitive rather than an analytic response:

I give myself up to the magicianship of the poem, postponing analysis until later...
My reactions after a first reading are these: 1) I enjoyed it. 2) It was an exciting ride.
3) There as something unique about it; at the same time, it felt familiar.²

Thus, the criticism of May Swenson exhibits some of the same features admired in her own poetry: honesty, delight, and enthusiasm. Far from being naive or mistaken, her approach leads to distinctive critical insights. For this reason Swenson was acknowledged by Bishop as one of her most valued readers:

If I had 1,000 readers like you I'd feel life had been worthwhile—no, that's asking too much—500 would do nicely. No more of that nobody-appreciates-me feeling....But I shall try to make one reader like you do me, and be properly grateful for that.³

¹ *PPL*, p. 809.

² *MWW*, p. 81.

³ *PPL*, p. 805.

Whether in journals or in book form, when faced with Bishop's poetry, Swenson's primary instinct was to praise. Thus, having seen two new poems in a *Partisan Review Reader* when scouring its pages in a bookshop, she writes to Bishop in December 1953 that 'Anaphora' and 'The other long one I want to read carefully again—exotic...' ['Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance'] are 'both beauties'.⁴ Swenson also records how happy she was to come across the published poem 'The Filling Station' in the offices of the *New Yorker* in December 1955, admiring it for its combination of seriousness and humour, and she admires 'Sestina'—and 'a beautiful long one that I could not read properly while [Howard Moss] chatted' which may have been 'Questions of Travel', accepted by Moss for publication in the magazine in 1956.⁵ That Bishop appreciated Swenson's comments on the poems is evinced in a reference to an unpublished letter (cited in *Made with Words*) where Bishop 'thanked Swenson for "so beautifully" getting the point of [Crusoe in England]'.⁶ What Swenson sees is 'the one of a kind, the explorer, marooned, mateless—who chose uniqueness, invented his survival equipment, and lived on his own world—only to find in the end that he's no *exception* to the common fate of all those others who never ventured'.⁷

Swenson is able to offer Bishop the same playful responses as a reader that she engages in to such effect in her own poetry. Her willingness to allow the poems to resist interpretation made her invaluable to Bishop as a first reader, and she often chose to eschew any psychological decoding that might implicate Bishop herself. Such an approach is in keeping with a recent presentation by Bonnie Costello who is keen to protect Bishop's poems from overly autobiographical interpretations. Costello underlines how the re-imagining of Crusoe and Friday is there for us to reflect on ourselves, rather than to look for effigies of Bishop or Lota de Macedo Soares in between the lines.⁸

⁴ *MWW*, p. 203.

⁵ *MWW*, p. 212.

⁶ *MWW*, p. 253.

⁷ *MWW*, p. 253.

⁸ Bonnie Costello, 'Elizabeth Bishop's Impersonal Personal', *American Literary History*, 15 (2003), 334-66

In her reading of Bishop's work, May Swenson was generally hesitant to offer close analysis. However in a letter in September 1953 by invitation she comments on a new Bishop poem:

'The Shampoo' I like *very* much—after many re-readings. Especially now, as I just read it, it sort of gently assembled itself for me.⁹

Bishop had a prestigious contract with *The New Yorker* giving them first refusal on any new work. On rare occasions, the magazine did turn Bishop's work down for publication. In 1953, for instance, Poetry Editor Katherine White had to convey the bad news about 'The Shampoo', explaining that 'this is a personal poem in which you do not quite seem to have described the occasion involved'.¹⁰ What is meant here by a 'personal' poem seems to be one that is prone to biographical de-coding. The implication is that the poem remains too close to its personal occasion, while the occasion has not been sufficiently realised for the general reader. With the reception of 'The Shampoo' being threatened by the homophobia of the times, Swenson was one of the few people to whom Bishop turned for encouragement. In relation to the poem having been turned down both by *The New Yorker* and *Poetry*, Bishop observed, 'I can't figure out why—it seems perfectly clear to me, and rather pretty. So please tell me exactly what *you* think.'¹¹

Swenson was tentative at first when asked to comment, saying to begin with, 'It feels right, but I would have a deuce of a time saying why.'¹² Swenson then does go on to say why, through feeling her way and exhibiting the kind of mind-thinking that Bishop might have appreciated. Swenson's account is an illuminating record of a first encounter with the poem. Not aiming to be authoritative, instead she accesses *other* truths, and finds original ways of stating them in terms of the friend's 'kind of foreverness' and the speaker's capacity to 'confer it upon her'. Swenson establishes the point that it is about an intimate relationship but at the same time she says that for

⁹ MWW, pp. 200-201

¹⁰ Biele, *Elizabeth Bishop and The New Yorker: The Complete Correspondence*, p. 112.

¹¹ MWW, p. 200.

¹² MWW, pp. 200–201.

her 'it's ridiculous to try to say in reportorial fashion what a poem "means"'.¹³ After its publication in *A Cold Spring* she reports that she

...looked up the copy of 'The Shampoo' you sent me once, to see if any changes had been made, and none had. It's curious how a thing in print becomes more positive, enters the mind with less conflict, than in typescript. 'The Shampoo' seems entirely filled out and complete to me here in the book. It has a hard-to-define mood, or tone, as has 'Argument' (which, at first, I couldn't find enough in to get hold of) but read aloud, a special tone or vibration comes from it giving the import that is beyond words.¹⁴

Swenson's value for Bishop was her unquestioning acceptance of the lesbian context for the love poems and a willingness to tolerate and to enjoy any 'hard to define' qualities. It is remarkable that Swenson picks out 'Argument' to bracket together with 'The Shampoo'. 'Argument' could be read as a series of outtakes from the making of 'The Shampoo', giving some more detail about how lovers recover from their arguments using 'days' and 'distance'. The gently rhyming poem has a slow, sad music that sounds like Auden, and takes his familiar 'hawk's eye view'¹⁵:

Days that cannot bring you near
or will not,
Distance trying to appear
something more than obstinate,
argue argue argue with me
endlessly
neither proving you less wanted or less dear.¹⁶

As part of the same letter in August 1955, Swenson comments in detail on the small group of new poems in *A Cold Spring*. The letter begins on 'a day at last when I'm able to read your book (again) and write you about it...Every one of the eighteen is

¹³ *MWW* p. 201.

¹⁴ *MWW*, p. 210.

¹⁵ Bonnie Costello has written of how 'Auden's distancing technique, what he called the "hawk's eye view," is evident in many of Bishop's early poems'. See, "'A Whole Climate of Opinion": Auden's Influence on Bishop', in *Something We Have That They Don't: British & American Poetic Relations since 1925* ed. by Steve Clark and Mark Ford (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004), p. 98.

¹⁶ *PPL*, pp. 60–61.

excellent in my opinion, with the possible exceptions (for me) of the Four Poems, and “Varrick Street”.”¹⁷ When Swenson is faced with the ‘Four Poems’, she is perhaps at the limits of her capacity for negative capability. ‘I don’t understand the ‘Four Poems’, that is I get their *mood*, but I can only imagine what they’re talking about’. Zona shows it is tempting to see ‘the palpable caginess of this correspondence as the symptom of sexual masking’.¹⁸ Indeed, Bishop’s reticence about the nature of sexual desire may have caused some of Swenson’s exasperation with the ‘Four Poems’. May Swenson’s emotional and sexual courage in life and in poetry was admirable. As Alfred Corn has said ‘No one who did not come of age as a lesbian in the 1940s, though, has the right to judge Swenson’s (or Bishop’s) choices’.¹⁹ Nevertheless, their different choices about reticence or openness inevitably contributed to the dynamics of their relationship. Yet Zona also demonstrates that what is at play at this point is Swenson’s developing poetics and an awareness that Bishop’s reticence had some poetic advantages. Years later Swenson was able to admit that what she most admired in Bishop poetically was her ‘casual and absolutely natural tone’, and Swenson goes on to say, in a letter of July 1963, that ‘their brilliance is inside, and not on the surface. And they are subtle—not obvious. I think my greatest fault is being obvious.’²⁰

In a response to a letter from the last days of August 1955, Bishop invites Swenson to read what she likes into the ‘Four Poems’— “the wilder the better”²¹— and she thanks Swenson for her reading of ‘The Shampoo’: ‘No one but you and one other friend have ever even mentioned [it], I don’t know why—I sent it to a few friends and never heard a word and began to think there was something indecent about it I’d overlooked.’²² However, towards the end of this five-page letter, Bishop addresses the open question Swenson has posed, adopting a sensitive approach by saying, ‘I am puzzled by what you mean by my poems not appealing to the emotions’.²³ This exchange may be a defining moment in the friends’ capacity to use one another to articulate their personal poetics. In her letter, Swenson tried to name the quality that

¹⁷ *MWW*, p. 208.

¹⁸ Zona, ‘May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop’, p. 62.

¹⁹ Alfred Corn, ‘The Love Poetry of May Swenson’, *Poetry*, 161 (1993), 295–98 (p. 296).

²⁰ *MWW*, p. 243.

²¹ *PPL*, p. 805.

²² *PPL*, p. 807.

²³ *PPL*, p. 809.

the poems all share insofar as they demand of the reader, '[s]omething else [than the emotions], and something more important'.²⁴ Bishop is defensive in her reply, and poses questions of her own: 'What poetry does, or doesn't [appeal to the emotions]? And doesn't it always, in one way or another?' As evidence, she presents a pair of contrasting poems—Dylan Thomas' 'Refusal to Mourn' and Marianne Moore's 'The Frigate Pelican'. The first promotes feeling before thought, she notes, where the second promotes thought before feeling. She goes on, qualifying further, 'But the sequence, and the amount of either depends as much on the reader as the poem, I think. And poetry is a way of thinking with one's feelings, anyway.'²⁵ Perhaps Swenson—to make use of Bishop's examples—is more wedded to Dylan Thomas's strategy than to Marianne Moore's. Meanwhile, Bishop is clear about where she feels most comfortable: 'I think myself that my best poems seem rather distant, and sometimes I wish I could be as objective about everything else as I seem to be in and about them.' In the same letter, however, it is notable that Bishop distances herself from Marianne Moore when she remarks that she was one of the friends who ignored 'The Shampoo', saying in confidence to Swenson, 'I'm afraid she can never face the tender passion.'²⁶ Bishop then goes on to make an admission that allows her to have it both ways: 'I don't think I'm very successful when I get personal,—rather, sound personal—one always is, of course, one way or another.'²⁷

Of the eighteen new poems in *A Cold Spring*, 'At the Fishhouses' Swenson finds to be moving in a way the other poems are not, 'partly because there is a you pictured in it',²⁸—reminiscent for Swenson of other more autobiographical works such as the story 'In the Village'. The speaker in the poem comes into view following the opening description of the maritime scene:

Although it is a cold evening,
down by one of the fishhouses
an old man sits netting,
his net, in the gloaming almost invisible,

²⁴ *MWW*, p. 208.

²⁵ *PPL*, p. 809.

²⁶ *PPL*, p. 807.

²⁷ *PPL*, pp. 809–810.

²⁸ *MWW*, p. 208.

a dark purple-brown,
and his shuttle worn and polished.
The air smells so strong of codfish
it makes one's nose run and one's eyes water.²⁹

At first the speaker is kept at a distance from the reader by the use of 'one' instead of the first person pronoun. However there is something about the tenderness of the description that makes the speaker's appearance unobtrusive. Then she is 'pictured', like a director performing a cameo in their own movie: 'The old man accepts a Lucky Strike. | He was a friend of my grandfather.' However Swenson's formulation—'there is a you pictured in it'—is interesting. She resists saying 'you, Elizabeth Bishop', and leaves a gap for the lyric 'I' to maintain its position. Arguably, without the force of that position there would be no access to the music which ultimately is created in the lines. As the poem proceeds the speaker does introduce themselves more particularly and intimately:

One seal particularly
I have seen here evening after evening.
He was curious about me. He was interested in music;
like me a believer in total immersion,
so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.

As reader and writer we are immersed in the idea of that element no mortal can bear and what it might represent. Swenson's point about finding the poem moving because 'there is a you pictured in it' underlines a yearning within us to want to be given a persona to identify with and to have feelings about. Swenson is aware of the value of *not* having this too, as in her remark that the other poems in *A Cold Spring* are admirable for being 'separate from the self that made them, rather than self-effigies as poems easily tend to be'. The human engagement in 'At the Fishhouses', where we see the speaker offering a fisherman a cigarette and the seal popping up to say hello, *is* moving—and charming and witty—and yet as Swenson says it is the mysterious lines 'Cold dark deep and absolutely clear, | element bearable to no mortal' that

²⁹ PPL, p. 50.

‘carved a groove in my mind, I’ll bet, forever—that music, that evocation, alone, is worth—. That many poems by as many other writers.’³⁰

III

I would like to conclude this chapter by looking at what sort of permissions and modes of enquiry Swenson’s reading of Bishop may have provided for Swenson’s own work. There can be no definitive answers and perhaps the best way to approach the question in terms of reading as a writer is for me to choose Swenson poems that are important to me in relation to my reading of Bishop, and thereby extend the reference points for the account of my own poetics in Chapter Six. The poems I have chosen, with their first publication dates are ‘Question’ (1954), and ‘Early Morning: Cape Cod’ (1958). One aspect that I would like to keep in mind is Alfred Corn’s insight that Swenson’s erotic poetry is suggestive ‘in metaphysical as well as physical ways’.³¹ To my mind Swenson and Bishop are united in a tendency towards philosophical searching, as if ‘thinking with your feelings’ was a way to engage in a distinctively poetic mode of enquiry.

In Elizabeth Bishop’s work the use of questions is fundamental to the poetics: a simple tally shows that, in the four volumes from *North & South* to *Geography III*, almost every other poem contains a question. In the first volume, eleven out of the thirty poems contain a question, and of those most have more than one with ‘The Monument’ alone containing seven., beginning with its opening line, ‘Now can you see the monument?’³² In *Questions of Travel*, ten out of twenty poems contain a question, while the title poem itself contains eleven. In the final volume seven out of its ten poems contain a question, with ‘In the Waiting Room’ having four, ‘Poem’ six and ‘Crusoe in England’ nine. The impulse to want to ask questions and the contract this sets up with the reader is something Bishop and Swenson held in common. It is feature of Bishop’s work that I will examine further in Chapter Five.

³⁰ *MWW*, p. 208.

³¹ Alfred Corn, ‘The Love Poems of May Swenson’, *Poetry*, 161 (1993), 295–98 (p. 298).

³² *PPL*, p. 18.

The questioning mode was crucial to Swenson, and for Grace Schulman it was clear that ‘questions are the well-spring of May Swenson’s art’.³³ Mark Doty has analysed the nature of the enquiry in Swenson’s ‘Question’, seeing it as centrally concerned with the site of the self: ‘What is the self, where is it? is it a good thing for that self to be hidden in the body?’³⁴ Visually, Swenson’s signature poem ‘Question’ is a narrow and uncluttered space. Its haunting atmosphere is created by asking what it will be like to be dead, without a place to live or to hide:

Body my house
my horse my hound
what will I do
when you are fallen

Where will I sleep
How will I ride
What will I hunt

Where can I go
without my mount
all eager and quick
How will I know
in thicket ahead
is danger or treasure
when Body my good
bright dog is dead

How will it be
to lie in the sky
without roof or door
and wind for an eye

With cloud for shift

³³ Grace Schulman, ‘Life’s Miracles: The Poetry of May Swenson’, *The American Poetry Review*, 23 (1994), pp. 9–13.

³⁴ Mark Doty, “‘Question’ and More Questions: Two Shells for May Swenson”, in *Body My House: May Swenson’s Work and Life*, ed. by Paul Crumbley and Patricia M. Gantt, (Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2006), pp. 195–204 (p. 199).

how will I hide?³⁵

Swenson's poem canters through the series of questions with eccentric capitalization, a lack of punctuation, and an urgent rhythm. It would be hard to say definitively whether the overall effect is, in Elizabeth Bishop's terms as noted above, to promote 'thought before feeling' or 'feeling before thought'. I would agree with Bishop when she says, that 'the sequence, and the amount of either depends as much on the reader as the poem'. One way of paraphrasing the question at the heart of 'Question' is, What will the person consist in without desire, without appetite '...when Body my good | bright dog is dead'? Grace Schulman has noticed how there is a fluid state in relation to gender within the poem, as the questioning voice 'is neither androgynous nor gendered, but [is] one that encompasses both sexes in its fluid boundaries and essentially human dimension: "What will I hunt", the male speaker's question, modulates [at the end], with no abrupt tonal change, to a woman's query, "With cloud for shift | how will I hide?"'³⁶

Another way of expressing the problem in 'Question' would be to ask, 'What is it like to be an "I"?'. Gudrun M. Grabher has demonstrated how Swenson's work has the effect of arguing against a division between self and the world built into the Cartesian formulation, 'I think therefore I am'. Grabher's readings of the love poems such as 'You Are', and 'Symmetrical Companion' illustrate how Swenson 'defies the philosopher's solipsistic prison of the *I* by affirming the existence of the *you* as a prerequisite for the existence of the *I*: "You are therefore I am"'.³⁷ The reader, too, is powerfully implicated in this arrangement whereby the existence of the subject is affirmed and made possible by the object. In 'Question', the speaker envisions the self as being an animal and so binds the self to the non-human realm, which in the end is transformed into the natural realm when the question becomes 'How will it be | to lie in the sky | without roof or door | and wind for an eye'. Far from being a disappearance, death is conceived as a kind of radical exposure. The poem's

³⁵ Swenson, *Collected Poems*, pp. 43–44.

³⁶ Schulman, 'Life's Miracles: The Poetry of May Swenson', p. 9.

³⁷ Gudrun M. Grabher, 'De-Cartesianizing the Universe' in *Body My House, May Swenson's Work and Life*, ed. by Paul Crumbley and Patricia M. Gantt, (Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2006), pp. 81-106 (p. 91)

rhetorical questions underline the urgent appeal to the reader to complete a world in which 'I' only makes sense if accompanied by 'you'.

The style of 'Question' is reminiscent of Emily Dickinson with its fractured sentences and phrases, the riddling tone, its admixture of passionate wit and innocent pleading. Ted Hughes identifies the twin modes of Emily Dickinson's writing as 'the hymn and the riddle', and one can see how much the description might apply to Swenson too. Hughes writes in his introduction to the *Selected Poems* how, with 'those two small domestic implements, [Dickinson] grasped the "centre" and the "circumference" of things – to use two of her favourite expressions – surely as human imagination ever has'.³⁸ Swenson and Dickinson also share a delight in the way the world and people in it are made with words, as in the following poem which Swenson identified as one of Dickinson's 'most excellent'³⁹

I send Two Sunsets—
Day and I—in competition ran—
I finished Two—and several Stars—
While He—was making One—

His own was ampler—but as I
Was saying to a friend—
Mine—is the more convenient
To carry in the Hand—⁴⁰

Swenson's 'Early Morning: Cape Cod', first published in *The New Yorker* in July 1954, shares with Elizabeth Bishop's 'The Bight' the liminal space of the seacoast. In the Swenson poem, Suzanne Juhasz suggests, the reader is positively immersed in the sound and sense world of the poem.⁴¹ Bishop, however, is intimate in a different way, and develops a closeness with the reader by being willing to show how complex perception is, and what a challenge it is to both the intellect and the emotions. In

³⁸ Emily Dickinson and Ted Hughes, *Emily Dickinson: Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 14.

³⁹ *MWW*, p. 154.

⁴⁰ Emily Dickinson and R. W. Franklin, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Belknap, 2005), p. 557.

⁴¹ Suzanne Juhasz, 'The Queer Poetics of May Swenson', in *Body My House: May Swenson's Work and Life*, ed. by Paul Crumbley and Patricia M. Gantt, (Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2006), pp. 181–94.

‘Early Morning: Cape Cod’ the reader is held close by Swenson’s rhyme, repetition, the inclusive ‘we’, the coupling, and the harmony. There is a tension between playfulness and the serious business of not being overwhelmed by experience. If ‘Early Morning: Cape Cod’ is about complete immersion in the water, the other meaning of ‘absorbing’ comes to the fore in ‘The Bight’, as if the attention paid to the scene through her absent-minded concentration, gives the viewer some measure of control ‘rather than being absorbed’.⁴² Swenson’s more sensuous immersion is partly achieved through repetition. The poem begins:

We wake to double blue:
an ocean without sail,
sky without a clue
of white.
Morning is a veil
sewn of only two
threads, one pale,
one bright.

Seven out of the eight end words in the first stanza are repeated in the last stanza: ‘blue’, ‘sail’, ‘clue’, ‘white’, ‘veil’, ‘two’ and ‘bright’. The phrase ‘double blue’ at the end of the first line appears at the end of the last line, too. Thus:

With creaking shears
the bright
gulls cut the veil
in two,
and many a clue
on scalloped sail
dots with white
our double blue.⁴³

This sonic doubling underlines the poem’s interest in all things twinned and joined. The chief coupling is between the ‘we’ who are viewing the scene. There is nothing

⁴² *PPL*, p. 46.

⁴³ Swenson, *Collected Poems*, p. 125.

in the poem to make clear that ‘we’ refers to just two people. And yet the intimacy of the perception and the quietly spoken tone speaks not of a crowd, but of a pair of lovers who have just woken. The two blues are ‘deep/royal blue and shy/iris, queen and king colors’, which does present them as a couple, joined in matrimony. Suzanne Juhasz’s conception of queer poetics is useful here: as she points out in her analysis of ‘Swimmers’, we often don’t know the genders of the protagonists in Swenson’s work. This is not a matter of deliberately concealing gender or sexuality, and yet the characters in ‘Early Morning: Cape Cod’ are still veiled. We do not know quite who they are, or who they are to each other. The use of metaphor here also queers the language, for example ‘sky without a clue/of white’ immediately presents the idea of a mystery. There is something about which we do not have ‘a clue’, unless and until, as Alfred Corn importantly points out, we start ‘peering intently through the gorgeous beaded curtain of this poet’s language where we believe we can see two women, and not the nude male-female couple of the pretty cover photograph [of *The Love Poems of May Swenson* published in 1991]’.⁴⁴

The image in ‘Early Morning: Cape Cod’ is queer in the sense that Eve Sedgwick refers to when she speaks of ‘the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality are made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically’.⁴⁵ All the borders in ‘Early Morning: Cape Cod’— between subject/ object, night/ day, sky/sea, bright blue/ pale blue, king/ queen— are contested and blurred. The luscious phrase ‘We bathe as if in ink’ slips away as the ‘we’ suddenly refers both to the couple in the poem and to reader and writer who are immersed in a union created by the written word as the poem is coming into being.

Throughout ‘Early Morning: Cape Cod’ the rhyme brings harmony to the scene and unites the action. The whole is stitched together within each stanza, and across stanzas too, for example where ‘dips’ is echoed by ‘downwhips’, and in turn ‘appears’ finds a mate in ‘shears’. There is patterning within the line, too, for example ‘as if’/‘a roof’ in stanza two, ‘taut’/‘taunting’ across stanzas three and four and ‘break’/ ‘creaking’ across stanzas four and five. The effect is of a world that is seamless and all

⁴⁴ Corn, ‘The Love Poems of May Swenson’, p. 296.

⁴⁵ Juhasz, ‘The Queer Poetics of May Swenson’, p. 182.

enveloping. The infinite present tense gives a sense of oceanic oneness. Intimacy is created by phrases like ‘our gaze’, as if two people are sharing a point of view completely. It is the same with sound (‘we hear a hinged cry’), with the senses being attuned between two people, united by all they hear. The blue is like the blank sheet of paper, the steady state onto which dabs of white—the sail, the gull—are introduced. It is the gulls that ‘cut the veil | in two’ as if there is a means for the poem—part riddle and part hymn—to provide access to another order of experience as the veil is drawn back.

By wondering about the value of concealment and revelation, Swenson manages to explore so successfully what is hidden from other areas of knowledge. In this way Swenson proves her case that poetry is a means of discovery, as in her statement that poetry is for her ‘based in a craving to get through the curtain of things’.⁴⁶ Swenson’s playfulness with language extends out from what Richard Wilbur refers to as the poems’ ‘wonderfully straightforward and ebullient sexuality’,⁴⁷ towards an interest in nature and the animal world from a subjective point of view, into the wider space of continual change. The poems are stunning in the same way that Dickinson’s are at times, and they achieve this by some of the same methods of indeterminacy. In Dickinson the reader and writer may fall away under questioning, only to come back stronger in their absence:

I’m Nobody! Who are you?
Are you—Nobody—Too?
Then there’s a pair of us?
Don’t tell! They’d advertise—you know!

How dreary—to be—Somebody!
How public—like a Frog—
To tell one’s name—the livelong June—
To an admiring Bog!⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Swenson, *Collected Poems*, p. 678.

⁴⁷ Richard Wilbur, ‘May Swenson: A Memorial Tribute’, *The Gettysburg Review*, 5 (1992), 81 (p. 84).

⁴⁸ Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, p. 260.

Swenson's life as a poet was a world away from Emily Dickinson's invisibility and anonymity, and her writing was different again in style from Elizabeth Bishop's 'awful but cheerful' restraint, and yet perhaps all three poets can be seen as approaching some of the same questions by inventing different ways of 'thinking with your feelings'. In Swenson, the result is an engagement with mystery that also yields a powerful coupling between writer and reader, who become symmetrical companions, bringing each other into existence:

My poems are prayers to a god
to come into being [...]

My poems pray him to be
manifest like lightning—

in one pure instant, abolish
and recreate the world.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Swenson, *Collected Poems*, p. 597.

Chapter Five – Elizabeth Bishop and Questions of Reading

The twenty *New Generation Poets* chosen in 1994 by the Poetry Society were asked to name their three most influential poems from the twentieth century. Five of the poets— Kathleen Jamie, Don Paterson, Jamie McKendrick, Sarah Maguire and Lavinia Greenlaw—chose Elizabeth Bishop’s *Complete Poems*, and for one other—the late Michael Donaghy—the book came very close.¹ In this chapter I want to reflect on my own responses as a writer to Elizabeth Bishop; responses that are a function of personal history, taste, caprice, desire and intellectual curiosity. My choices from amongst her poems relate to the strategies and techniques discussed so far in the thesis, regarding how poets read each other and how their creative work is changed or illuminated as a result. The underlying assumption about the nature of reading as a writer is that a poet’s reading preferences are part of a process of developing their own poetics. Furthermore, the way they read influences the types of cues they provide for readers in return. The challenge is to be able to present my choices from the work of Bishop as I have just done with Swenson, and to place them in the context of my poetic practice in the final chapter.

On the occasion of her being awarded the Laureateship of the United States, John Ashbery pronounced that Bishop was ‘a writer’s writer’s writer’,² by which he meant to indicate a supreme level of sophistication. Yet, to add to the superlatives, she is also a reader’s reader. One source of this professional admiration on both sides might rest in the way the poems foreground the problem of literature. Bishop’s poems have a way of positioning the reader such that our inevitable failures of interpretation are acknowledged, even appreciated. For all her painstaking authorial control, an awareness of our mis-reading is built into the text and is part of her subject. This is set out by Lee Edelman in his important paper ‘Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop’s “In the Waiting Room”’. Edelman shows how the opening poem of *Geography III* should not be seen through the lens of autobiography or the philosophy of identity. Rather, it is primarily a poem about reading. Here, and throughout

¹ ‘Poetry Review: New Generation Special Edition’, ed. Peter Forbes, (London: Poetry Society, 1994)

² John Ashbery, ‘Second Presentation of Elizabeth Bishop’, *World Literature Today*, 51 (1977), pp. 8–11 (p. 8).

Bishop's work, we become used to experiencing "the uncanny nature of her poetry's anticipation of its own mis-reading".³

In her own exchanges with Gerard Manley Hopkins and May Swenson—reading and being read—we have seen something of Bishop's artistic habits. How might these translate into ways of positioning the non-artistic reader? The questions of fact and truth that are central to the exchanges with May Swenson come into the poems themselves. The manner in which Swenson and Bishop staged their discussions—at times didactic, witty, teasing and above all careful—is also reflected in the tone of the poems. The non-artistic reader is provided with cues such that they are invited into an intimate, shared space. I will look at how this operates in a number of poems that fall into two groups: first, poems using parenthesis including 'The Bight', 'In the Waiting Room', and 'The Moose'; and secondly poems featuring questions including 'Questions of Travel', 'Poem' and 'Five Flights Up'. Both strategies involve the reader in a kind of intimacy. In the use of parenthesis we are often drawn close and asked to notice 'a mind thinking' reminiscent of Hopkins. Bishop's questions meanwhile serve to tug at the limits of knowledge. While they may be part of a religious impulse, they should not be mistaken for theology. Bonnie Costello quotes the letter to Anne Stevenson where Bishop suggests that she may be part of a Transcendentalist tradition: 'I also feel that Cal (Lowell) and I in our very different ways are both descendants from the Transcendentalists—but you may not agree.' However Costello resists the idea that for Bishop 'seeing was a form of religious revelation' and disagrees with David Kalstone's suggestion that she was a theological poet.⁴ The questions perhaps therefore have a different function.

I

Seamus Heaney has noted that, 'so often in Bishop's work, the parenthesis (if you have ears to hear) is the place to hear the real truth'.⁵ Heaney was writing of the '(Write it!)' in 'One Art' which he says 'holds the balance' between the key rhyme

³ Lee Edelman, 'The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop's "In the Waiting Room"', *Contemporary Literature*, 26 (1985), 179–96 (p. 182).

⁴ Bonnie Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 8.

⁵ Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995).

words of the villanelle, ‘master’ and ‘disaster’, in a poem already discussed above. With his tongue in his cheek no doubt, Heaney’s own parenthesis serves to raise expectations— ‘(if you have ears to hear)’ is a challenge any dedicated reader would surely like to meet. Here I want test the claim by examining three instances in detail from ‘The Bight’, ‘In the Waiting Room’, and ‘The Moose’. ‘The Bight’ begins with a parenthetical epigraph – ‘[On my birthday]’—that changes everything.⁶ In ‘In the Waiting Room’ it is the phrase ‘(I could read)’, which underscores how much the poem is about reading and its relationship to emerging human consciousness and questions of personal identity. It is the underlining of ‘(We all feel)’ in ‘The Moose’ that gives the sense of how all the passengers in the bus are united in their perception of this ‘curious creature’.

If we imagine ‘The Bight’ without its epigraph it immediately becomes less grounded in time and much less intimate. Yet the note just under the title ‘[On my birthday]’ is not a date as such. As Thomas Travisano has shown, the location in time is actually a contrivance or, as he puts it, ‘an artistic calculation’.⁷ This is based on the fact that some of its key images were communicated to Robert Lowell in a letter of 1 January 1948 and therefore occurred to Bishop before her birthday on 8 February 1948. That is to say, the poem was not written *in situ* in the way that the epigraph might literally suggest. Her reference to ‘The Bight’ when it was just written is dismissive: on 14 February 1948 she remarks, ‘I have just about finished a long & complicated one about Key West—& then I hope I won’t have to write about the place anymore.’⁸ Bishop’s self-presentation is disarming. Lee Edelman makes sense of her insistence on grounding her poems in the literal by arguing that ‘this assertion of literality must itself be interpreted as a figure’.⁹ As Edelman writes of ‘In the Waiting Room’— and, in my view, the same equally applies to ‘The Bight’— the poem manages ‘to imply that the textual inside masters the reader outside of it far more than the reader

⁶ In some editions this epigraph appears in italics rather than in brackets.

⁷ Thomas Travisano, *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), p. 108.

⁸ Bishop and Lowell, *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*, p. 26.

⁹ Lee Edelman, ‘The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop’s “In the Waiting Room”’, *Contemporary Literature*, 26 (1985), 179–96 (p. 182).

can ever master the text'.¹⁰ In the first line we are drawn in as if we were at the speaker's shoulder:

At low tide like this how sheer the water is.

The syntax, especially the use of deictic phrase 'like this', encourages an easy-going familiarity. The cadence is similar to that of 'Musée des Beaux Arts' perhaps, as in 'About suffering they were never wrong | the Old Masters'.¹¹ However, in contrast to Auden's assertiveness, in 'The Bight' from the start meaning is being co-created with the reader. The challenge is summed up in the line 'Absorbing, rather than being absorbed' if we think of this as referring to the act of perception:

Absorbing, rather than being absorbed,
the water in the bight doesn't wet anything,
the color of the gas flame turned as low as possible.
One can smell it turning to gas; if one were Baudelaire
one could probably hear it turning to marimba music.

As a reader we must remain actively engaged. In Swenson's terms, the reader needs to be available to 'knowledge achieved' as well as 'knowledge received'. The same attitude is needed for reading as is needed for writing: not to become enthralled to what another vision—Baudelaire's, say—might have been, but to be true to your own. The relationship between writer and reader in 'The Bight' seems at first to be one where the speaker is talking to herself, and we are being given the privilege of listening in. The value of this self-talk lies in the lyrical gift of a moment being captured and in the dynamism of the mind in action. The poem's physical location is not easily registered with its hard edges, testing currents, and general mess. However, with the 'perfectly off-beat claves' the sound of the dredge sets up a steady rhythm. This metronome makes possible a distinctive sound world—albeit not the 'marimba music' the reader might hear if he or she were reading Baudelaire. Without apologizing for it, the speaker makes it plain that she can only tell the thing her own

¹⁰ Edelman, 'The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop's "In the Waiting Room"', p. 188.

¹¹ W.H. Auden, *Collected Shorter Poems, 1927-1957* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p.123

way and give an honest account of the way ‘it seems to me’.¹² The evidence of her letters would seem to show that, to return to the actual painter of the scene, Bishop found personal comfort in the note of stoicism on which it ends:

All the untidy activity continues,
awful but cheerful.

Writing to her clinician Dr Anny Baumann in February 1949, in a letter in which she discusses her recent period of ill health, she includes a copy of ‘The Bight’ and comments in a postscript:

I think I’ll enclose a poem about Key West that was in *The New Yorker* a few weeks ago. I wrote it last year but I still think if I can just keep the last line in mind, everything may still turn out all right.¹³

What is the function then, of the parenthetical ‘[On my birthday]’? The epigraph tugs at the difference between the lyric ‘I’ and the actual poet Elizabeth Bishop as a unified, stable, embodied self. ‘The Bight’ strives for order by using repetition and binaries with which to record sense impressions. Given the vein of uncertainty running through the poem, the diction is also tinged by an existential chill: the couplings begin in the third line with ‘dry’/ ‘dry’, and continue with ‘absorbing’/ ‘absorbed’, ‘gas’/ ‘gas’, ‘one can’/ ‘one could’, ‘off the end’/ ‘off-beat’, and a little later on ‘sponge’/ ‘sponges’, ‘letters’/ ‘littered’, ‘click’/ ‘click’, and the concluding internal, full rhyme ‘jawful’/ ‘awful’. As readers, we must work painstakingly through such ‘old correspondences’, to make sense of a coded world in order to locate beauty and sustenance within it. And yet, to use Edelman’s formulation, perhaps the dichotomy of ‘inside/outside’ has broken down. The parenthetical ‘[On my birthday]’ has brought in the author only to hide her away again, leaving the sense that she—and we—are both present and absent at the same time. In a search for meaning we are left with the bay strewn with storm-battered boats ‘like torn-open, unanswered letters.’ It is like a scene from ‘The Purloined Letter’, the Edgar Allen Poe story evoked by Jaques Lacan to question our impulse to look for clues when the answer to literary

¹² *PPL*, p. 46.

¹³ Bishop, *One Art: Letters Selected & Edited by Robert Giroux*, p. 184.

interpretation may be in full view.¹⁴ Bishop's posthumously published 'Edgar Allen Poe and the Juke Box' has some echoes with 'The Bight', for example the manuscript bore the torn off scrap of a line 'blue as gas' at the top of the page, and the poem itself is concerned with music and the steady beat of the juke box:

The burning box can keep the measure
strict, always, and the down-beat.

Poe said that poetry was *exact*.
But pleasures are mechanical
and know beforehand what they want
and know exactly what they want.¹⁵

Perhaps, this suggests, poems do not know what they want. What they have to offer is a way of 'looking for something, something, something'.¹⁶ The notation of the epigraph '[On my birthday]' in 'The Bight' may be a means of hiding in plain sight, of laying one's cards on the table while at the same time managing to disappear.

That day, pinpointed to 08 February 1948, when Bishop turned thirty-seven years old is not the only time she brings her birth date to bear on a poem. In 'In the Waiting Room' again the poet's radical strategy of identifying herself is adopted only for Elizabeth Bishop to disappear before our very eyes. As Lee Edelman puts it, the poem is about reading, and he is careful to refer to the speaker in quotation marks as "Elizabeth", making the central character into a persona who serves to dramatise the problem of our engagement with poet and text. The dichotomy of 'inside'/ 'outside' is called into question in the account of the relationship between the waiting room and the dentist's surgery, and between the child and her aunt. What becomes unclear is the source of the cry when 'Suddenly, from inside, | came an *oh!* of pain'. The puzzle is properly located in the question of reading if we notice the remark which is both dismissed and highlighted by being placed in parenthesis. As Edelman says,

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan and Jeffrey Mehlman, 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"', *Yale French Studies*, 1972, 39–72.

¹⁵ Bishop, *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments*, p. 49.

¹⁶ *PPL*, p. 125.

“Elizabeth” ‘offers off-handedly, in a parenthetical aside, the assertion that governs the whole of the passage preceding the cry: “(I could read)”’.¹⁷

My aunt was inside
what seemed like a long time
and while I waited I read
(I could read) and carefully
studied the photographs:
the inside of a volcano,
black, and full of ashes;
then it was spilling over
in rivulets of fire.¹⁸

The effect of the parenthesis is to draw attention to the claim. Edelman continues, ‘Just as she has mastered reading, and as reading allows for a mastery of culture, so reading itself, for the young “Elizabeth,” is understood as an exercise in mastery.’ Yet this misconception is what leads to the scream of pain.

Suddenly, from inside,
came an *oh!* of pain
—Aunt Consuelo’s voice—
not very loud or long.
I wasn’t at all surprised;
Even then I knew she was
a foolish, timid woman.
I might have been embarrassed,
but wasn’t. What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was *me*:
my voice, my mouth.

¹⁷ Edelman, ‘The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop’s “In the Waiting Room”’, p. 187.

¹⁸ *PPL*, p. 149.

What the problem of reading leads to in the first instance is the difficulty of knowing who is speaking—‘What took me | completely by surprise | was that it was *me*: | my voice, my mouth.’

In Winnicottian terms, the transitional object is not wholly under the control of the infant. It is paradoxically a ‘me’ and a ‘not me’ object, in the sense that it is both created by the infant and exists outside of it and was waiting to be found. As an adult, an engagement with culture through learning makes demands on us that are both internally validated by personal responses and externally underwritten by the minds of others. Mastery—of reading, just as of the art of losing—is not possible. All we can master is the ability to survive the cry of pain when reading brings about a contact between our inner psyches and the outside world.

The awakening of consciousness of “Elizabeth” in ‘In the Waiting Room’ is precisely dated: ‘I said to myself: three days | and you’ll be seven years old.’ And yet as seen in ‘The Bight’, the literal facts have been changed for the sake of the poem. For example the person who cries out in pain from the dentist’s chair is named as ‘Aunt Consuelo’ but was in fact Bishop’s Aunt Jenny, as we learn from the autobiographical story, ‘The Country Mouse’¹⁹. Furthermore in a letter to Frank Bidart, Bishop explains that she swapped a story from one issue of *National Geographic* to make it appear in the February issue of 1918, ‘my mind kept going back to another issue of the NG that had made what seemed like a more relevant impression so me, so [I] used it instead’.²⁰

In the biographical story covering the same event, written in 1961, the existential shock experienced by the child is stated in extremely grave terms:

A feeling of absolute and utter desolation came over me. I felt....myself. In a few days it would be my seventh birthday. I felt I, I, I, and looked at the three strangers in panic. I was one of them too, inside my scabby body and wheezing lungs. ‘You’re in for it now,’ something said. You are you,’ something said. ‘How strange you are,

¹⁹ *PPL*, p. 426.

²⁰ *PPL*, p. 881.

inside looking out.’...It was like coasting downhill, this thought, only much worse, and it quickly smashed into a tree. *Why was I a human being?*²¹

The act of reading is also mentioned in the prose version of the event. Here too, the claim of proficiency is in parenthesis, this time between dashes. ‘I looked at the magazine cover—I could read most of the words—shiny, glazed, yellow and white’. Whilst reading may console it also in part precipitates the crisis. The magazine represents something of our human existence, reflecting it back in a way that makes it no less frightening, but there is a hopefulness in the end that art and culture in this context becomes a source of salvation:

The waiting room was bright
and too hot. It was sliding
beneath a big black wave,
another, and another.

Then I was back in it.
The War was on. Outside,
in Worcester, Massachusetts,
were night and slush and cold,
and it was still the fifth
of February, 1918.

For all the poem’s insistence on specifics of time and place the emphasis is still on those words in brackets, ‘(I could read)’. The problem of interpreting the world, the boundary between fact and truth, and between people, is framed in those brackets, highlighting how the text refuses to be framed.²² The act of reading may lead to pain, but in the end art does help us to wait, at least, until life in all its unmanageable, uncontained mess, may again feel more bearable.

²¹ *PPL*, p. 426.

²² Edelman, ‘The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop’s “In the Waiting Room”’, p. 193. Edelman quotes Barbara Johnson’s essay ‘The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida’ to bring out how the frame “becomes not the borderline between the inside and the outside, but precisely what subverts the applicability of the inside/outside polarity to the act of interpretation”.

In Bishop's long narrative poem 'The Moose' there are four uses of bracket leading up to '(we all feel)' in the final dramatic question:

Why, why do we feel
(we all feel) this sweet
sensation of joy? ²³

The setting is the beginning of a long-haul bus ride beginning in Nova Scotia heading all the way to Boston that takes in the maritime villages along the way:

One stop at Bass River.
Then the Economies—
Lower, Middle, Upper;
Five Islands, Five Houses,
where a woman shakes a tablecloth
out after supper.

The poem comprises twenty-eight six-line stanzas loosely rhymed with mostly three stresses per line. The first use of brackets is in a litany of woes overheard in the conversation of other passengers

...deaths, deaths and sicknesses;
the year he remarried;
the year (something) happened.
She died in childbirth.
That was the son lost
when the schooner foundered.

The invitation here is for the reader to fill in the blanks themselves, creating a partnership in meaning-making. This is the first stage in a building rapport with the reader. The second use of brackets is in the next but one stanza, where reported speech is this time both quoted and paraphrased:

'Yes...' that peculiar

²³ *PPL* pp. 158–162.

Affirmative. 'Yes...'
A sharp, indrawn breath,
half groan, half acceptance,
that means 'Life's like that.
We know *it* (also death).'

What is being spoken about and heard and interpreted is the acceptance of death at an everyday level by ordinary folk. This could be read as a progression from the solitary perspective of 'The Bight' through the dawning realisation of a shared humanity in 'In the Waiting Room' to this atmosphere of womb-like comfort in 'The Moose' with its description of the bus travelling through familiar places in the dark with elders quietly and stoically carrying their burdens and counting their blessings. What increases this homely register is the appearance out of 'the impenetrable wood' of the moose:

Towering, antlerless,
high as a church,
homely as a house
(or, safe as houses).
A man's voice assures us
"Perfectly harmless..."

One function of the use of brackets here is to give the poem the feeling of being a work in progress. The self-correction that is such a feature of Bishop's voice is in evidence here to enact how our perception of the world is constantly open to revision. Again the effect is to pull the reader in, as if the adjustment is being made to accommodate them and to keep them in mind. The excitement then of the apprehension of the marvellous creature is matched by an increasing involvement of the reader in the totality of the scene. The internal world of the speaker to which we have been given privileged access is still available even as the miracle of nature is being appreciated:

Taking her time,
she looks the bus over,
grand, otherworldly.

Why, why do we feel
(we all feel) this sweet
sensation of joy?

The bracketed phrase here functions as an intensifier. It increases the value of the reference to ‘we’ so that it is taken to mean not just some of us on the bus, but every single one. It is a reach towards a universal symbol. In the context of the poem the ‘we’ is also ‘all who have encountered this work of art including you who are reading it now’. For the creature emerging from the unconscious is analogous to the poem itself. Again, the power of Bishop’s art lies in its capacity to give the uncanny sense of how the poem is itself being received even as we are reading it. The four uses of parenthesis in ‘The Moose’ are like depth charges sounded in the second half of the poem. They allow a feeling to build of fierce engagement with the reader as we are pulled in to witness a natural and artistic phenomenon and how it affects the lives of a group of people. A community is established on the basis of a creative act made possible not just by the artist but by the viewers and readers who are co-creators of the event.

II

The impulse to ask questions is behind both *Pennyfields* and the academic research supporting it in this critical thesis. Indeed, such an inquisitive stance may be the clue to my personal poetics, the central question of which has been: What is the relationship between imagination and reality? Or as Elizabeth Bishop has it, ‘Oh, must we dream our dreams † and have them, too?’

I want to note some of the most pronounced features of the questions in Bishop’s poems and to see how they relate to my own poetics as developed and articulated in this thesis. One aspect is that Bishop’s questions sometimes appear in the last, or penultimate, line—something true for ‘Over 2,000 Illustrations...’, ‘The Shampoo’, and ‘First Death in Nova Scotia’. Here, the effect is to leave the action of the poem when it is in full flight—a characteristic that Bishop herself noted as being reminiscent of Hopkins. Some of her questions do come with answers—“Account

books? They are Dream Books” in ‘Manuelzinho’²⁴ — and some feel like statements of poetics in themselves, or are at least moving towards one. As in ‘Poem’ for instance with its account of ‘life and the memory of it so compressed | they’ve turned into each other. Which is which?’ I want to look particularly at how the questions function as a way of handling the reader, and to close the chapter I will look at this aspect of ‘Questions of Travel’, ‘Poem’ and ‘Five Flights Up’.

As already noted, ten out of twenty poems in the volume *Questions of Travel* contain a question, while the title poem itself contains eleven. The cardinal reference point in ‘Questions of Travel’ is Blaise Pascal’s contention that “All of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone”,²⁵ as the traveler notes precisely at the end of Bishop’s poem:

*“Is it lack of imagination that makes us come
to imagined places, not just stay at home?
Or could Pascal have been not entirely right
about just sitting quietly in one’s room?”*²⁶

It is valuable to compare ‘Questions of Travel’ with the early poem ‘Chemin de Fer’²⁷ from Bishop first volume published in 1946. Both poems cover some of the same ground if we think of the assertion in the earlier poem—‘Love should be put into action’—serving as a kind of question. That is, if we can hear the assertion followed by a silent and hesitant, ‘should it not?’ If not, the dirty hermit is quite within his rights to live by the little pond, ‘like an old tear | holding on to its injuries | lucidly year after year.’²⁸ But if it is true that ‘Love should be put into action’, then all other attempts at going out into the world are also supported. The questions in ‘Questions of Travel’— for example, ‘What childishness is it that while there’s a breath of life | in our bodies, we are determined to rush | to see the sun the other way around?’— can also be answered in these terms. The implied answer is that we travel, and are motivated to all kinds of human activity, out of love. As we have seen, the same sort

²⁴ *PPL*, p. 78.

²⁵ Blaise Pascal and A. J Krailsheimer, *Pensées* (London: Penguin Books, 1995).

²⁶ *PPL*, p. 75.

²⁷ *PPL*, p. 6

²⁸ *PPL*, p. 6.

of tension exists in ‘The End of March’, where the temptations of solitude and a place to read ‘boring books, | old, long, long books, and write down useless notes’²⁹ is as a refuge from ordinary human relating and the company of friends. If the questions of travel can be seen in this light as involving questions of reading, they are posed of course to the person most fully engaged in the activity in the moment, the reader of the poem. Uncannily, we are being asked to think about the value of what we are doing as we read. It is a risky move, which if successful can be the basis of a firm friendship with the speaker of the poem and/or the poet as we wonder together about the worth of the enterprise we have jointly undertaken.

The questions in ‘Poem’ are more concerned with the way art is apprehended and known. How does art achieve its effects? What is the correct way to respond to it? Should we think of the marks or the act of representation: ‘Elm trees, low hills, a thin church steeple | —that gray-blue wisp—or is it? In the foreground | a water meadow with some tiny cows, | two brushstrokes each, but confidently cows’, and later ‘a wild iris, white and yellow, | fresh-squiggled from the tube’.³⁰ The description of the painting becomes a parallel commentary on the writing of poetry. For example the bracketed phrase in the form of a question ‘(a sketch for a larger one?)’ trips off in this reader thoughts about Bishop’s own practice and about which poems may be seen as sketches towards larger ones, which letters and stories become the basis for poems and vice versa. The idea of working in parallel is a central motif in the poem with the artist’s vision being compared to the speaker’s:

Our visions coincided—“visions” is
too serious a word—our looks, two looks:
art ‘copying from life’ and life itself,
life and the memory of it so compressed
they’ve turned into each other. Which is which?³¹

This question has the power of compression that the poem itself describes. It functions as a way of re-stating the problems of aesthetics and the philosophy of art in a personal key. The other question in ‘Poem’ attacks the same problem from a

²⁹ *PPL*, p. 168.

³⁰ *PPL*, p. 165.

³¹ *PPL*, p. 166.

different angle, as it notices in the painting how ‘A specklike bird is flying to the left. | Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird?’³² At stake here perhaps is the question of what it is we are seeing, and what is our role in understanding it. Is its appearance due to randomness or design? The enigmatic title ‘Poem’ attaches both to the painting under discussion and to the art work being made before us as we read it. As we have seen above in Chapter One the intimacy between artist and world, and poet and painting, also provides the structure for the relationship between reader and poem.

‘Five Flights Up’ has a special place in Bishop’s oeuvre as it was placed as the last poem in the last volume of poems published in her lifetime. Its relationship to questions is slightly different in that it begins with a wordless question. To quote the entire first stanza:

Still dark.
The unknown bird sits on his usual branch.
The little dog next door barks in his sleep
inquiringly, just once.
Perhaps in his sleep, too, the bird inquires
once or twice quavering.
Questions—if that is what they are—
answered directly, simply,
by day itself.³³

It is as though every day brings new questions—and not just for humans. The explicit question posed in the fourth stanza, is posed humorously, ‘What has he done?’ as if to the dog-owner:

The little black dog runs in his yard.
His owner’s voice arises, stern,
“You out to be ashamed!”
What has he done?
He bounces cheerfully up and down;
he rushes in circles in the fallen leaves.

³² *PPL*, p. 165.

³³ *PPL*, p. 171.

The playfulness of this is reminiscent of the teasing correspondence with May Swenson. Yet the tenor of the poem is far from cheerful by the end. The question signals something at the heart of the poem, namely humankind's capacity for shame. Dogs and birds may cheerfully answer the question posed by each new day, and feel no shame about their past actions, and no heaviness in the heart for the losses that they bear. Yet for us, there is a different outlook:

Obviously, he has no sense of shame.
He and the bird know everything is answered,
All taken care of,
no need to ask again.
—Yesterday brought to today so lightly!
(A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift.)

The last line is brought to prominence within its punctuation marks. It evokes all the vulnerability of the speaker: it revives all the questions that have come before and allows for no easy answers. Posing unanswerable questions seems to be one of the signal strategies in Elizabeth Bishop's work. From 'Oh, must we dream our dreams | and have them, too?' through 'life and the memory of it so compressed | they've turned into each other. Which is which?' to 'What has he done?' the reader is invited to interrogate their own memory and desire as a reader. The questions allow us to see how the problem of interpretation is about not just how we read the poem, but how we read each other and the world.

Chapter Six – *Pennyfields* and Two Best Friends

In this final chapter and the conclusion I will demonstrate the symbiotic relationship between critical and creative work. I will discuss how the aesthetics of my own work have been influenced by Bishop, Swenson and others: my reading of Bishop and Swenson, of course, takes place in a context of other reading – of philosophy and of poets from Lucretius to Mark Doty. I am aware of the dangers of an over-emphasis on reading, as if literary practice might become a closed circle. I have argued that reading represents a mode of engagement with the world, and the subject therefore becomes not just about relating to other poems, but relating to, creating, and understanding other people and other things. Thus, not only can Bishop's work be aligned to a pragmatist philosophy, for example, but, more importantly, in reading her poems we have an uncanny sense of being watched, as if the poem knows more than we do about what it is like to be in our own skin. This perspective leads me to organize my discussion of the poems in *Pennyfields* by reference to two categories: first, those which are connected to the relationship between poetry and philosophy; secondly those which are exploring ideas about reading, intimacy and community.

I

My poems in this volume reflect an interest in philosophy as a mode of enquiry as I engage with texts from Lucretius to modern analytic philosophy. My approach is not to engage directly with philosophical ideas, but to engage with the experience of reading poetry as a way of showing 'a mind thinking'. In the course of the thesis, the relation between poetry and philosophy has been a concern in the background, noticing techniques and statements of poetics in Bishop and Swenson that shows their interest in epistemological poetry. Bishop often referred to her own work as being no more than description, leaving much unsaid. In a bad-tempered exchange with Richard Wilbur in the last year of her life, she seems to want to argue him out of his acceptance of Christian doctrine on the spot, saying 'You don't believe all that stuff. You're just like me. Neither of us has any philosophy. It's all description, no philosophy.'¹ Wilbur reports being surprised by the attack and strikes a note of pity

¹ Fountain and Brazeau, *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography*, pp. 348–9.

for Bishop's position of having a religious sensibility without the accompanying faith. May Swenson is more open about her exploratory stance, with her poems seen as an attempt 'to get through the curtain of things'. How does my poetics stand in relation to these two positions?

'The Festive Bus' [p. 33] is about the use of examples in analytic philosophy and the disjunction between thinking and feeling. My response was not to see poems as examples of philosophical ideas, but rather to see the poetry in the examples. The relationship between philosophy and poetry becomes an integral part of the poem. Barrie Falk's paper 'Doing What One Meant to Do'² sets out to understand the paradox of how we can both mean to do something and do it without thinking, with reference to Wittgenstein and Kripke. Falk's solution is about a partial forgetfulness, without which everyday activities would be impossible. My poem is ultimately about the value of forgetting and of not seeing: 'It is best I act blindly'. 'The Festive Bus' is about not being sure what you want and the risks of failing to recognize one's heart's desire. Falk's example of the festive bus is a vivid reminder of the limits not only of analytic philosophy, but of over-thinking in any sphere without reference to affect, and colour. Falk's 'festive bus' also summoned up other associations. Thus my poem is like a muted version of the call in the last line of Elizabeth Bishop's 'Pink Dog', 'Dress up! Dress up and dance at Carnival!'

'XLIX' [p. 20] again addresses this dichotomy between philosophy and the urgency of the image and bodily felt experience. Its poetic reference points are Philip Larkin's 'Aubade',³ and Michael Hofmann's 'XXXX'.⁴ The urgency of the first line is as if to suggest that metaphor will take the reader more directly to the truth than abstraction, 'Skip philosophy and go straight to what | I'm wearing'. The speaker's declaration that 'transcendence | and nothingness want equal houseroom' introduce philosophical concerns into a domestic space. The solitary voice is like Bishop's "Crusoe" in 'Crusoe in England' who explains that the smallest of his 'island industries' was 'a miserable philosophy'. My speaker is torn between the refusal of consolation in Larkin and something more theologically willing. In poetic terms it is

² Barrie Falk, 'Doing What One Meant to Do', *Synthese*, 98 (1994), pp. 379–99.

³ Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003).

⁴ Michael Hofmann, *Approximately Nowhere* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999).

as if we all have to choose between the real and the imagined. The real—the aches and pains in the body, the material world, other people—are set against the possibilities of another life made in poetry ‘as these are the turns by which my soul | is made’. That line break contains a pun in the sense that it is the ‘making’ involved in verse that provides a consolation for the absence of faith. The poem refuses a transcendent ending perhaps bearing in mind Elizabeth Bishop’s advice to Miss Pierson not to ‘try to tie everything up neatly in 2 or 3 beautiful last lines’.⁵ The yearning in my poem to ‘try to understand number’ could also be read as a drive to understand poetry. The ending in that case would be a release from any goal-orientated activity and the gratitude for a place of peace, sounded in the echoing end words ‘number’ and ‘older’.

‘The Way Things Are’ [p. 15] has a different relationship to philosophy. The text borrows from Lucretius, specifically from Book VI of his *De Rerum Natura*,⁶ but it is more of a dialogue with the author of that passage than a translation of it. The poem is about friendship. It was inspired by attending a lecture on Lucretius at St John’s College in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with a close relative. After the lecture, it was as if Lucretius was a real-life companion who had stepped out of his literary frame, and we included him in our conversation. The humorous conceit in my poem that Lucretius could be ‘on the phone’ features in J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*⁷ when, as Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle put it, Holden Caulfield indulges his “‘call-an-author” fantasy’. The humour is particularly in the ‘blurring of the distinction between living authors and dead ones’ as when Caulfield decides he would like to call up Thomas Hardy for a chat.⁸ The boundary between the living and the dead, and the boundary between poetry and philosophy, are blurred in ‘The Way Things Are’ by another problematic distinction— between writing and speech. *De Rerum Natura* as a work in translation often captures Lucretius’s boundless enthusiasm for the topics under discussion, expressed in an entertaining way that speaks directly to the reader. Derek Mahon draws out the verbal aspect of this poetic voice in his 2005 translation ‘Lucretius on Clouds’, for example in the lines ‘Some come from space, as I’ve

⁵ Bishop, *One Art: Letters Selected & Edited by Robert Giroux*, p. 596.

⁶ Titus Lucretius Carus and Walter G Englert, *On the Nature of Things* (Newburyport, MA: Focus Pub., 2003).

⁷ J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951, 2010)

⁸ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 4th edition (Harlow: Routledge, 2009), p. 21.

explained before, † their number infinite, their source obscure, † and these can travel at the speed of light.’⁹ It is this colloquial style of speech that I wanted to pick up in my poem. My poem is also about the excitement of friendship, and my last line stresses how the energy of original, creative ideas can be dissipated in animated conversation. The final phrase ‘you should be writing it down’ can be read as a piece of instruction to the reader or self-instruction to the poet.

‘News from the Philosophy Department’ [p. 34] was inspired by the section in ‘The Redress of Poetry’ by Seamus Heaney where he gives a masterful account of the kinetic forces at work in George Herbert’s ‘The Pulley’. Heaney describes how the poem replicates the hydraulics of the pulley with the exchange of meaning taking place concerning the word ‘rest’: ‘one of the word’s semantic loads—“rest” as in sense of repose—is gradually let down...another meaning—rest in the sense of “remainder” or “left-over”—begins to rise.’¹⁰ This analysis captivated me and gave me the idea of a poem being intrinsically restless, forever in motion, as illustrated by the image of a paternoster. The reader has to know that a paternoster is an antiquated form of lift for passengers that runs on a continuous belt. The term ‘paternoster’ has an obvious echo in theology with its secondary meaning relating to prayer. Through this secondary sense I wanted to allude to Herbert’s poem and the idea of learning being about contemplation. Another point of reference is the last stanza of Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘Large Bad Picture’,¹¹ with its choice of alternatives between ‘commerce or contemplation’. My concern is again with originality; hence the address to what the philosophers chose to do ‘When they came to design their own building’. For me the poem is about by the twin imperatives of economic viability and a love of learning. Hence the last stanza:

For every proposition there should be a counter
and what goes up must come down. O Philosophy,
you angel! caught forever between commerce and love.

⁹ Derek Mahon, *Harbour Lights*, 1st edition (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2005), p. 21.

¹⁰ Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*, p. 11.

¹¹ *PPL*, p. 8-9

The histrionic exclamation is an affectionate teasing of philosophy as a discipline, suggesting in its tone that analytic philosophy may seem overly pedantic as a practice, condemned to an ivory tower, but it is much loved for all that. The poem is everywhere concerned with balance and weight, both within lines and stanzas, reflecting the original prompt for Heaney's reading of 'The Pulley'.

'The Problem of Identity' [p. 18] takes a philosophical puzzle and treats it to a poetical response. The allusions are to Bishop's 'The Bight' and to John Ashbery's 'The Painter'. Ashbery's poem gave me the idea of having a narrative, and I adopted a similarly childlike voice to his opening lines where the speaker relates, 'Sitting between the sea and the buildings | He enjoyed painting the sea's portrait'. If 'The Problem of Identity' does have a latent form it is perhaps the sestina—as in 'The Painter'—with its characteristic repetitions and its circling dance. Certainly, my own final couplet shares something of the music of the sestina's coda, gathering in names already spoken, shuffling them into a new order, in order to refer back to the poem's title. 'Above us all in the night sky: the evening star, | which is the morning star, which is Venus' has some of the halting and postponed cadence that is also found at the end of Ashbery's sestina: 'They tossed him, the portrait, from the tallest of the buildings; | And the sea devoured the canvas and the brush | As though his subject had decided to remain a prayer.'¹² I am fortunate enough to have had a critical response to my poem by Fred D'Aguiar, who in a discussion of poems eligible for the Geoffrey Dearmer Prize 2010 wrote:

[an] epistemological bravura governs 'The Problem of Identity', a fine meditation in the form of allegory aimed at disturbing our constructs of group belonging and what counts as reality, for an alternative invested in phenomena and what is imagined. (Does this argue against Lowell's poetic desiderata of something real not imagined?)¹³

This reference to Lowell's 'Epilogue' raises the problem of the confessional mode, and his self-directed challenge 'Yet why not say what happened?' I agree with my esteemed reader's suggestion that my poem is countering this proposal. The difficulty

¹² Ashbery, *Selected Poems*, p. 3.

¹³ Fred D'Aguiar, 'Geoffrey Dearmer Prize 2010', *Poetry Review*, 101 (2011).

in my poem is one of naming. Proper names cannot be used to identify people and things in the straightforward way we once thought. Language is continually slipping its moorings, and the signifier and signified are in a fluid relationship, as with the turning of the tides. The only fixed point in my poem is the star but even then, it is not easy to identify.

‘A Finzi Reverie’ [p. 19] is a musical interlude, a poem about and inspired by listening. It is the result of a writing exercise set by the education officer at the Royal Philharmonic Society, who invited Royal Holloway students to write about an unnamed piece of music. The exercise involved listening to the same short piece, at the same time of the week in the same place for four successive weeks. This led to a poem about contemplation, listening, and a sort of internal reflection where the narrator is noticing the feelings that are held in the near silence of an apartment in Paris. It is a poem that describes a friendship, where the need to be desired is suspended in the peace of art and meditation. The word ‘reverie’ is an allusion to Bachelard, author of titles including *The Poetics of Reverie*,¹⁴ and to his concern with architecture and the unconscious in *The Poetics of Space*.¹⁵ The soundscape of the poem is built around three rhyming phrases: ‘on the floor’, ‘Gare du Nord’, and ‘waiting for’. The reference to reading generates a comparison between Verlaine who ‘we’ve read out loud’ and lazily lying with your feet up beneath a bookshelf full of great books. ‘I’m putting my feet up beneath philosophers’ becomes a statement of poetics that could be compared to Swenson’s distinction between ‘knowledge achieved’ and ‘knowledge received’ and is also a reference to Auden’s sense of the poet’s ‘lazy habit of only reading what he likes’.¹⁶ The balcony is an image that alludes to the act of reading if we think of it as a structure that is both inside and outside, making a figure for poetry conceived as a transitional space. Although ‘A Finzi Reverie’ could have been discussed as a poem about reading, I have included it here as the culminating point of an address to the relations between poetry and philosophy.

¹⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language and the Cosmos* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971)

¹⁵ Paul Muldoon has seen a connection between Elizabeth Bishop and Gaston Bachelard, and is convinced that Bishop was ‘familiar with *The Poetics of Space* while she was writing the poems of *Geography III*.’ See *The End of the Poem*, p. 141

¹⁶ W. H. Auden, *The Dyer’s Hand* (London: Faber, 1962, 2013), p. 48.

II

The opening poem in the volume ‘On Reading’ [p. 14] engages with the experience of reading and specifically with the question of where we are when we read. Are we in our memories, in a world created by the text, or in a world created by the writer? The matter refers back to the earlier discussion in the thesis of Bishop’s ‘Poem’ and the idea that literal truth causes a shift in our orientation towards the work of art (‘Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!’), and to Murray M. Schwartz’s formulation in ‘Where is Literature?’ that Winnicott’s ‘potential space’ is a way of us negotiating between subjective and objective positions. The reference points in the poem ‘On Reading’ are the Bible and Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.¹⁷ Here I am interested in the combination of solitude and community that arises in the activity of reading. As discussed earlier the capacity to be alone is a requirement for any reader, and yet in the act of interpretation [s]he is required to make connections with others. The poem as a first offering to the reader in a new volume is intended as a welcome. However it also wants to complicate the transaction at hand—what is the status of the lyric “I” and “you” here?—and to raise questions about the limits and possibilities of the imagination as stimulated by use of poetic language. The attempt in the poem is to awaken the uncanny notion of literary ghosts and to signal that the poems in *Pennyfields* sometimes want to encounter the reader in this haunted space.

‘Mimesis’ [p. 61], from the end of the volume and written much later, is interested in the activity of making—rather than receiving— a work of art. One of the sources for the poem is the idea—contained in both Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘Poem’ and May Swenson’s ‘Early Morning: Cape Cod’—that two people might be able to look at the world as one. In Bishop’s poem the concept is explored in relation to artists’ perceptions, with the apprehension of a rural scene by a painter who was a relative leading to the reverie over ‘our looks, two looks: | art “copying from life” and life itself, | life and the memory of it so compressed | they’ve turned into each other. Which is which?’ This exploration of life and art, memory and the response to art by

¹⁷ Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967, 2014)

both Bishop and Swenson has been very influential on my own poetry. In ‘Poem’ the boundary between two artists elides into a parallel comparison of reality and imagination. To find resemblances in the world is what binds the couple together in my poem. Swenson’s couple in ‘Early Morning: Cape Cod’ swim in an oceanic oneness, ‘our double blue’, as we have seen above. But the reader is invited to share the experience of union: ‘we bathe as if in ink’. ‘Mimesis’ attempts to create a haiku-like stillness, but it also copies, or alludes to, Larkin (from ‘Trees’) in its final, italicized word in the last line. It is as if originality is an impossible quest, and the speaker is settling for a copy of an artistic vision rather than attempting something truly his own. Yet this too is a kind of fidelity to the relationship. The sense of waiting a few more seasons to ‘see what | they might bring’ brings the meditation to an end on a hopeful note sounded by – ‘my songbird’ – poetry itself.

‘In Gordon Square’ [p. 16] uses the device of placing a remark in parenthesis to highlight the activity of reading and its location. The square in the title is a reference to Virginia Woolf and the over-determined event of the speaker reading her novel *The Waves* in the Gordon Square where she lived from 1922-1929. The poem is puzzling at the enigmatic nature of the author, at once a heroine and celebrity and an inaccessible recluse. The poem adds to the layers of allusion by mentioning Elizabeth Bishop and citing the image in her poem ‘A Cold Spring’ where it is the fireflies that rise ‘—exactly like the bubbles in champagne’.¹⁸ With these two major literary figures over the writer’s (and the reader’s) shoulder so to speak the poem wants to foreground the transitory nature of all things. Even literary monuments will be worn away in time perhaps, and all we really have is love in the present moment. How can poets—any of us—speak to generations past and to those not yet born?

‘Having Children’ [p. 45] could not have been written without Swenson’s ‘I Look at My Hand’, which engages with the theme of childlessness and artistic reproduction. How are poems made? How do poems stand in relation to other poems and poets? What is artistic possession and who do poems—or children—belong to anyhow? ‘Having Children’ makes a friendly distinction between Hugo Williams and Michael Hofmann, on the one hand, and three other poets mentioned in the final line only by

¹⁸ *PPL*, p. 43.

first name. There is an allusion to May Swenson in the mention of dunes, and of a tiger, as in ‘Poet to Tiger’;¹⁹ Elizabeth Bishop is conjured in the image of a kite on the beach as in ‘The End of March’;²⁰ and in the reference to the Esso brand of petrol, familiar from ‘The Filling Station’.²¹ The identity of “Mark” may not be a clear allusion in terms of the poem on its own, but is in fact a reference to Mark Doty, whose influence I discuss in the conclusion to follow.²² In this way my poem becomes a letter to a living mentor like Bishop’s ‘An Invitation to Marianne Moore’ or Swenson’s ‘Dear Elizabeth’. Through the invocation of these other poets, I also present my conception of making poetry as a continued critical and creative conversation.

Thus, another poem in *Pennyfields*, ‘Lovesong with a Sandcar’ [p. 60], could not have been written without May Swenson’s ‘The Wave and the Dune’.²³ Alongside being in dialogue with Swenson’s poem, mine wishes the conversation to be precisely about how poems speak to each other. Swenson suggested in her published interviews that she didn’t write in relation to other poems:

If I’ve been influenced by other poets it’s been unconscious—I hope I haven’t, too much...It’s no fun unless you stand on the end of the diving board, alone, naked, not thinking of ‘how’ or ‘why’ or the best technique, but just the sensation...And not to care whether anyone’s watching or not is very important.²⁴

And yet—as my previous chapters have demonstrated— a conscious influence is evident if we think of the poems for Elizabeth Bishop and of the profound echo of Emily Dickinson throughout her work. The other point of contention relevant here is from Swenson’s ‘I Look at My Hand’ where she holds that ‘what can make no replica | can spring from me’.²⁵ My own poem, ‘Lovesong with a Sandcar’, has the strong

¹⁹ Swenson, *Collected Poems*, p. 376-379.

²⁰ *PPL*, p. 167-169

²¹ *PPL*, p. 123-124

²² ‘Seeing Beyond the Veil, Dominic McLoughlin in conversation with Mark Doty’, *The Bow-Wow Shop* 8, Page 9, May 2012

²³ Swenson, *Collected Poems*, p.281

²⁴ *MWW*, p. 238.

²⁵ Swenson, *Collected Poems*, p.299

sense that poets *do* make replicas, and perhaps I set out to make one of ‘The Wave and the Dune’. As in ‘The Problem of Identity’ the context of family relationships is used to create an allegory for making as an artist, where ‘I am making a sandcar for my son’. The poem is interested in pre- and re-generation, noticing that ‘glass is made of sand | not the other way around’. The second stanza sets up an ebb and flow of ‘claim and counterclaim’ which in the context of a dialogue about literary influence becomes a love song to those who have come before, in this case particularly May Swenson. My poem yearns, as it were, to speak to hers, where ‘The dunes, we know, are sea shaped, | speaking back to the waves, as if they | too know how to break....’

Another poem in dialogue with Swenson is ‘Shower Outside’ [p. 32], which alludes to the opening of ‘Question’ in the phrase ‘body, my house’. Swenson’s poem switches between metaphors for the body, from house, to dog, to sky – ‘without cloud for a shift where will I hide?’ The other reference point in ‘Shower Outside’ is the idea of being hidden. Mary McCarthy said of Elizabeth Bishop: ‘I envy the mind hiding in her words, like an “I” counting up to a hundred waiting to be found...’²⁶ This rings true, and yet it presents a paradox when compared to Bishop’s avowed interest in ‘a mind thinking’ based on the early influence of Hopkins.²⁷ Certainly, the paradox of the lyric poet is that the narrator is both always and never completely identified with the self. ‘Shower Outside’ similarly entertains the idea that lyric both hides and reveals the individual human subject. The house is turned inside out, with an intimate space becoming exposed, and yet still hidden. My poem is therefore interested in, and can be read as a comment upon, the freedoms and restrictions in the tension between life and art.

‘A Screen for Elizabeth and May’ [p. 63] is intended as a tribute to Bishop and Swenson. It tugs at the veil of language that Bishop and Swenson seem to me to have wanted both to install and to remove, curious to know what might be hidden behind. It aims for a moment of revelation after painstaking description. The poem is a list of aural and visual sense impressions leading to the final salutation, as if we could just for a moment glimpse behind the screen to communicate with loved ones who have

²⁶ Lorrie Goldensohn, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 53.

²⁷ *PPL* p. 666.

died. The exclamation, 'how we would a wave', and the cadence of the last line, reappears at the end of another of my poems 'First Day on the Island Without You' [p. 59], in its similar attempt 'to sing through to you', hoping to arrive at a lyric moment where the impulsive action is fully achieved: 'I leap to my feet, and I wave'.

Conclusion

There is something in the dynamics I have traced between Bishop and Swenson that speaks to the relationships I seek to create in *Pennyfields*. They are relationships between self and the world, between my poems and others, and between me and my reader. My work also makes use of a variety of techniques and approaches arising from my reading of Bishop and Swenson: 'a mind thinking', a questioning stance, and, perhaps above all, a poetics of reticence, hiding and revealing the self to hold the reader close but without relying upon autobiographical material to establish a bond of trust. The emphasis is on play, but also on making the fully achieved poem that is then available to the general reader.

During the course of writing this thesis several new books aimed at the general reader have adopted a critical mode that is deliberately subjective to illuminate the work of the critic as much as the subject under discussion. This is the case for example in Maureen McLane's *My Poets*,¹ Don Paterson's *Smith—A Readers Guide to the Poetry of Michael Donaghy*² and, most recently, Colm Toibin's *On Elizabeth Bishop*.³ Due for publication by W.W. Norton later this year is a study by Mark Doty of Walt Whitman, *What is the Grass*, which uses the same model. Doty told me about the project in our interview on Long Island, New York in the summer of 2010.⁴ Doty could be seen as another 'best friend' in the sense developed in this thesis. He explained that he was not interested in writing 'standard issue literary criticism':

I want to characterise who I am as the person reading these poems ... and give the reader the opportunity to participate in an action of reading with me. So it's like what I'm also saying in the poems about wanting to make a kind of model of perceptual process because I think criticism can do exactly the same thing.

Doty went on to link this stance to the Whitman project:

¹ Maureen N McLane, *My Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

² Don Paterson, *Smith: A Reader's Guide to the Poetry of Michael Donaghy*, Main market ed edition (Picador, 2014).

³ Colm Tóibín, *On Elizabeth Bishop* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁴ 'Seeing Beyond the Veil, Dominic McLoughlin in conversation with Mark Doty', *The Bow-Wow Shop* 8, Page 9, May 2012

It's an experiment. There is more of my own life in the book than I would have allowed myself to do in something like the Swenson essay or in previous pieces of criticism. I am really talking about myself as well as talking about his poems.

Doty's reference to a 'model of perceptual process' relates to another part of the interview when we were discussing his poem 'To Cavafy'⁵:

That poem is in my first book, and I had begun to allow myself the latitude for a different kind of inclusiveness in my poems, more room for meditation, for inquiry, for taking the given image, that which presented itself and signalled to me the presence of the poetic, and then asking, What do I have to say about that? What do I have to learn about that through the action of writing the poem?

It was then acknowledged in our discussion that the sort of self-questioning, the 'mind thinking' that has been featured in this thesis, was something that linked Cavafy, Bishop and the work of Doty himself. Doty then continued that, in addition to the 'mind thinking' there was also 'a sense that the process of perception is unfolding before the reader as we read the poem':

Of course, that is an illusion. It's a made thing, an artefact of perception. I learned from Bishop and from Swenson something about this sense of the poem as a drama of perception, in which insight was being conjured up from the act of examining what one sees. And they are splendid teachers of that.

For Doty, too, then Bishop and Swenson have been important as teachers.

In the context of my thesis, it is interesting that poets such as McLane and Paterson have produced a form of criticism that might be seen as 'indirect memoir', while Doty wanted to 'give the reader the opportunity to participate in an action of reading with me'. Rather than making this critical study into a form of indirect memoir, I have wanted to make use of 'reading as a writer'—both in relation to Bishop and Swenson's engagement with each other's work and in relation to my own reading of

⁵ Mark Doty, *Turtle, Swan & Bethlehem in Broad Daylight: Two Volumes of Poetry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000) p. 51-54.

their work. To put it another way, I have wanted to use my particular experience of encountering two poets who matter to me and who engaged in a supportive critical reading of each other's work, as a way of entering the room – the whispering gallery as it were – of literature. Thus, my criticism has been conducted in a spirit of playfulness, where 'reading as a writer' became a way of drawing critically on the 'perfectly useless concentration' that is used to write poems in the first place.

Alan Williamson in 'Falling off the World: Poetry and Innerness' has identified 'solipsism' as a code word that signals a distrust of innerness prevalent in English Studies since the mid-1970s.⁶ Interestingly, Williamson takes for the title of his essay a phrase from Bishop's 'In the Waiting Room'.⁷ He states that the poetry that interests him is precisely that which negotiates the boundaries between inner and outer experience – something I have presented as a characteristic of Bishop's work. Mark Doty too offers his poems as an interrogation of solipsism, for example in the early poem 'To Cavafy' with its lines, 'Is it solipsism | to love not the world | but what you make of it?'⁸ In terms of 'The Capacity to Be Alone' identified by Winnicott, there is something profoundly social involved here: the capacity to be alone is the capacity to be alone *in the presence of another*. Rather than being cut off from others, the capacity to sit alone and endure the 'wordy racket' from without and within and to be able to love 'what you make of it', is the basis for cultural life. It is in such potential spaces that a community of poets is created. It then becomes a matter of temperament and personal aesthetics to decide how much the experience of reading is brought into the poem.

Doty has acknowledged how his poems are constantly referring to other poets and this can be seen in examples such as 'Demolition' (Robert Lowell),⁹ and 'At the Boatyard' (Elizabeth Bishop).¹⁰ In *Theories and Apparitions*, the encounters with other poets, living and dead, is central to the volume with its visions of Berryman and Whitman.¹¹

⁶ Alan Williamson, 'Falling off the World: Poetry and Innerness', in *Poets Teaching Poets: Self and the World* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 84–94 (p. 86).

⁷ PPL, p. 150.

⁸ Doty, *Turtle, Swan & Bethlehem in Broad Daylight: Two Volumes of Poetry* p. 52.

⁹ Mark Doty, *My Alexandria* (London: Cape Poetry, 1995) p. 1.

¹⁰ Mark Doty, *Atlantis* (London: Cape Poetry, 1995) p. 27.

¹¹ Mark Doty, *Theories and Apparitions* (London: Cape Poetry, 2008) p. 13, and p. 19

In the 2010 Long Island interview, Doty makes a statement about the value of referring to one's reading in one's poetry:

I was taught early on that it was sort of somehow bloodless or academic (academic in the pejorative sense) to allow your poem to be about poetry, or for poetry to be too much in the poem. 'It ought to be about life!' But I just think that is a load of American bullshit—that you should be out having real experiences and writing about them from the gut. Reading is a real experience! Reading touches my inner life.¹²

I have been made aware through reading the work of Bishop and Doty that the experience of reading is a boundary that can be part of the subject of the poem. Indeed, as Bishop describes in a letter to Robert Lowell when reading in her studio in Brazil, reading is an integral part of life:

I read Coleridge, and read him, & read him—just couldn't stop—until he and the waterfall *roaring* under the window, and ten times its usual size, were indistinguishable to my ears.¹³

In such letters and in the undergraduate essays, Bishop gives a clear sense of how reality and imagination overlap and how that becomes a subject of her creative work. I have drawn on psychodynamic theory, particularly the object relations perspective of D.W. Winnicott, to articulate my understanding of the process of reading in relation to my subjects and in turn to my own writing. The trajectory in my learning has been from individual experience to friendship and love. Elizabeth Bishop's work was valuable in the first stage of this journey, for its interrogation of subjectivity. For Bonnie Costello, 'Bishop's poetry, especially in *Geography III*, becomes a critique of the idealization of solitude.' Her poems provided a place to explore 'unsettling questions about the relation of inner to outer self, of imagination to reality.'¹⁴

The conception of poetic 'best friends' has allowed me to think about the way I relate to other poets and to examine the quality of that interaction. I have used the term

¹² 'Seeing Beyond the Veil, Dominic McLoughlin in conversation with Mark Doty', *The Bow-Wow Shop* 8, Page 9, May 2012

¹³ Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery*, p. 124.

¹⁴ Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery*, p. 32.

‘reading as a writer’ to define my engagement with the work of Bishop and Swenson. My research has had a pedagogical context institutionally, both in relation to my teaching on the module ‘Reading as a Writer’ at Royal Holloway, University of London, and because reading the work of historical mentors provides a model for relating to contemporaries in a workshop setting. The chief quality of the interactions in a workshop is the same degree of ‘carefulness’ as shown between ‘best friends’. To see the workshop as a potential space is to allow for a range of responses characterised by not knowing and play. This is a step forward from the capacity to be alone, but one that preserves, in a learning environment, its vital creative elements.

By using psychodynamic theory, paradoxically, I have demonstrated how writing poetry is not a form of therapy having resonance only in its personal occasion. Object-relations thinking relies upon the development, in health, away from paranoid-schizoid towards the more depressive positions. That is, the activities of reading and writing are fundamentally concerned with tolerating loss and negotiating the boundary between subjective and objective experience. My aim is to make poetry that is available as a ‘transitional object’ and that has meaning not just for the writer but for the reader, and can therefore take its place in the cultural field.

It is this wider context that I have referred to as the third stage in the movement from individual experience to friendship and love. Love seems to be the best word to capture the intimacy to which the poems finally aspire. That word carries some of the play and carefulness present in the first two stages outlined by Winnicott below, and adds to them the quality of openness necessary for the work to be made available to the general reader. For Winnicott there is a gradual progression involved: ‘There is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing, and from playing to shared playing, and from this to cultural experiences’.¹⁵ One question of reading that became compelling for the thesis creatively and critically was how to formulate an original response to well-known material. My poems were drawn towards this puzzle, for example in ‘The Problem of Identity’, ‘Love Song with a Sandcar’ and ‘Mimesis’ which are all concerned with the relationship between generations. They question the order of priority in families between parents and children, and in art between an

¹⁵ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 51.

original and its copy. Other poems dramatise how far personal identity is defined by existing artworks, such that life comes to feel like living in a film, a sculpture or a poem, for example in 'The Third Layer' [p.42], 'My Brother as a Calder Mobile' [p.43], and versions of poems from Italian such as 'The Infinite' [p. 57].

For all their interest in reading there is an impulse in *Pennyfields* to want to get away from literature, even from the company of those who are my 'best friends'. Yet this is a hopeless quest and the site of my poems, is, to quote Elizabeth Bishop,

still loved,
or its memory is (it must have changed a lot).¹⁶

In metaphysical terms, if one can neither escape artistic imagination nor get back into reality, is there any phenomena that could be relied upon to help us mediate between the two? To quote Bishop's 'In the Waiting Room', is there—has there ever been—anything that 'held us all together | or made us all just one'? Bonnie Costello has argued that for Bishop any such unifying force is not theological, and it is not Romantic: 'The sense of oneness...is abysmal rather than blissful; it derives less from transcendent unity than from a fragmented vision of human contingency'.¹⁷ My background in philosophy and this examination of the process of reading as a writer, has led me towards interest in metaphysics and a wish for that point of unity. Perhaps the nearest I get to a unifying image in *Pennyfields* is in the last lines of 'The Problem of Identity' [p. 18]:

Above us all in the night sky: the evening star,
which is the morning star, which is Venus.

As a transitional object, the success of this or any other poem will depend upon the critical judgement and the personal taste of its readers.

¹⁶ *PPL*, p. 166.

¹⁷ Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery*, p. 123.

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PPL – Bishop, Elizabeth, *Poems, Prose, and Letters* (New York: The Library of America, 2008)

MWW – Swenson, May, *May Swenson: Made with Words* ed. by Gardner McFall (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998)

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